

Termites

In nature, termites are recyclers of dead wood and plants; they are nature's cleanup crew. In your home, termites are a pest that can cause serious damage. The annual damage caused by termites across North America is about two billion dollars. There are two reasons that termites can cause such a lot of damage:

1. They often go unnoticed. When termites enter a house they don't walk around in plain sight. Instead, they chew their way along inside wood, following the grain, never coming to the surface.

Once they have had their fill, they return to the colony in the soil outside.

2. Many wood-destroying insects such as carpenter ants damage wood by excavating the wood to build a nest. Termites actually eat the wood. As a result, the damage continues to spread. An average size colony of subterranean termites can consume one foot of 2X4 in about 4 months.

What's worse than a termite? A termite with wings! In the spring, it's possible to see a winged termite. The wings are only temporary. This is one way that new colonies can form. Winged reproductives swarm and land a distance away from the colony. When they land, they shed their wings and attempt to form a new colony. If you see winged termites, you know there is termite activity in the area.



Ant (left) and termite (right)

Is it a Termite or an Ant?

To the untrained eye, termites look somewhat like white ants. But termites are not ants at all. It's easy to tell the difference. The illustration above shows an ant on the left and a termite on the right. The ant has a narrow waist and elbowed antennae. The termite has a broad waist and straight antennae.

Subterranean Termite

The subterranean termite is the most common species in North America. They are creamy white in color. As the name suggests, subterranean termites build their colonies underground. Subterranean termites cannot expose their bodies to open air for any length of time or they dehydrate and die. Foraging worker termites build shelter tubes to span exposed areas. A shelter tube is a tunnel made of mud. For example, the shelter tube illustration on the next page spans an open area across a concrete footing of a deck. The termites are now protected as they make their way from the soil to the wood deck post.

Formosan Termite

The formosan termite is an exotic species of termite accidentally introduced to the United States from China. Formosan termites are often called super termites because they have much more destructive power than subterranean termites. Formosan termites are larger and more aggressive. They have much larger colonies and can establish secondary colonies in moist wood in a house and do not need to return to the soil. Formosan termites are found in humid coastal and subtropical regions including Hawaii, Florida, South Carolina, Georgia and Louisiana.

Drywood Termites

Drywood termites don't need as much moisture to survive as subterranean termites do. They don't need constant contact with the soil, so they can infest and create colonies in multiple locations throughout the home such as the attic and exterior wood members. They don't build shelter tubes like the subterranean termite. The colonies are usually much smaller so their potential for damage is less. The down side is, there may be multiple colonies, so locating and treating may be more difficult.

Treatment

Chemical barrier: The most common treatment method for subterranean and formosan termites is injection of a termiticide into the soil around the home to create a barrier between the home and the termite colony. A successful treatment requires that there are no areas of wood-to-soil contact that could create a termite bridge over the barrier.

Baiting system: In-ground baiting systems are becoming a popular method for dealing with subterranean termites. The baiting systems ultimately result in worker termites carrying a chemical back to the colony that causes the colony to die.

Fumigation: For drywood termites, whole house fumigation is often required. The entire house is tented and a fumigation gas released.

Prevention

1. Termites are attracted to moist wood and soil. Eliminate sources of water in and around the house. Repair plumbing leaks, redirect downspouts, improve land grading around the house.
2. Break wood-to-soil contact. For example, wood stair stringers and deck or porch skirting should be kept out of the dirt.
3. Don't store wood on the ground near the house. Remove wood and plant debris from the yard. If you have a wood pile, it should be raised off the ground and located away from the wall of the house.
4. If you live in a known termite area, be vigilant for signs of infestation such as shelter tubes. Have your home inspected periodically by a termite inspection expert.
5. New construction should incorporate termite prevention strategies.

