

Termites pose serious threat to homes

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You're spending a leisurely afternoon on the back deck when you notice a strange insect floating through the air. Before you know it, there's another, then another and another. There's a whole swarm of them.

What are these flying insects? Termites searching for a new home.

"This time of year we start to see more activity with termites," said Bob Davis, chief entomologist with The Termite Institute, a termite education Web site.

Recognizing their presence before they take up residence in your home could save homeowners a lot of heartache and money.

There are different types of termites — drywood, dampwood and subterranean. It's the subterranean types that can do the most damage in the shortest amount of time. They live underground and build mud tubes to reach food sources — wood and any other cellulose material. According to the National Pest Management Association, subterranean termites can collapse an entire building.

Termites typically swarm as temperatures warm up. As winter recedes, the kings and queens leave colonies to start new colonies, Davis said. They're not strong flyers and native subterranean termites will swarm during the day when humidity is higher. They may go a couple hundred feet or yards. But when these swarmers find other termites, they'll lose their wings and begin to dig into the soil.

The concern, Davis said, is when you're sitting in your living room and spot the swarmers.

"If the swarmers are inside that means there's a problem," Davis said. "That means something is going to have to be done. If you have inside swarms there's damage in your home already."

Gulf Coast hurricanes and the debris left behind may lead to a more rapid spread of the dreaded Formosan subterranean termite, a variety native to China which first appeared in the U.S. after World War II. Formosan termites are more aggressive and usually have larger numbers in colonies than the native eastern subterranean termite, Davis said. And once they've infested a home, they're difficult to control.

Dr. Xing Ping Hu, a specialist with the Alabama Cooperative Extension System and an assistant professor of entomology and plant pathology at Auburn University, said Formosan termites have become more prevalent in Gulf Coast states, especially since Hurricane Katrina nearly three years ago. She's not identified samples of Formosan termites in southeast Alabama, but pest control technicians have reported their presence as close Covington County.

"People need to know what they need to do," Hu said. "... The bottom line is termites are posing more of a threat in our state than ever."

Davis and Hu give the same advice to homeowners — find a good, reputable pest control company whether it's a national, regional or local company.

"You're dealing with an insect that can damage your property," Davis said.

Make sure the company is licensed or certified. The Alabama State Department of Agriculture and Industries regulates pest control companies. Many homeowners may already have a termite inspection contract. Know what the contract says. Some contracts may exclude repairs or may exclude certain types of termites.

Hu suggests homeowners be present when their home is initially treated for termites as well as when annual inspections are done.

Davis said seeing swarmers outside the home doesn't necessarily mean you should retreat your home. But you should at least contact your pest control provider and have your home inspected. If swarmers have been spotted close to a structure, termites pose a real threat.

"Termite control — it's tough," Davis said. " ... Get with a professional and put together a plan. Stop it before it happens."

Types of termites

Subterranean

There are a variety of subterranean termites, so called because they need contact with the soil to live. They build mud tunnels to reach food sources without being exposed to the air. As creepy as it sounds, such colonies can number into the millions and are the most destructive of termites. The Eastern subterranean termite is the most common in the U.S. Swarmers usually go out to start new colonies in the spring, flying during the day when humidity is high.

Typically creamy color and about 1/8 of an inch long. However, the Formosan termite — the most destructive of subterranean termites — is yellowish-brown and about 1/2 inch in length.

Prevention tip: Keep water away from your home's foundation. Use properly-functioning downspouts, gutters and splash blocks. Reduce humidity in crawl spaces with proper ventilation, and never bury wood scraps or waste lumber in the yard. Most importantly, eliminate wood contact with the soil. Maintain a 1-inch gap between the soil and wood portions of a building or home.

Drywood

These termites live off dry wood. They do not need a connection to the soil like subterranean termites and instead move through tunnels that go with the grain of the wood. They can be found in structural beams in attics, furniture, wood floors and even window trim. The southeastern drywood termite typically swarms at night with the peak swarming time between late May to mid June.

Light brown in color; long, narrow and oval in shape. Drywood termites can be up to 1 inch in length.

Prevention tip: Keep firewood and scrap wood stored at least 20 feet from the home. Drywood termites form new colonies by gaining access to wood through small holes so seal all cracks and crevices in a structure.

Dampwood

These termites infest wood with high moisture content and are often larger in size than other types. The need for moisture usually means they're not found in structures, but take care to not attract them.

Brownish in color. King and queen dampwood termites can be 1/2-inch to 5/8-inch long and have two pairs of wings that are equal in size and shape and extend beyond their abdomen. Nymphs range up to 5/8 of an inch and worker dampwood termites are up to 3/4 inch in length.

Prevention tip: Make sure downspouts and gutters are diverted well away from your home or any wood structure. Avoid prolonged contact between a structure and large areas of moisture such as ponds.

Sources: The Termite Institute, www.termiteinstitute.com; National Pest Management Association, www.pestworld.com

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