

Termites: How to Deal with These Uninvited Guests in the Home

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In general, insects have a bad reputation. The vast majority of insects either cause no harm or are in fact very beneficial to mankind. However, there are a few that cause us problems. Among insect pests that most homeowners dread the most, termites certainly rank at the top.

"Know thine enemy" is obviously sound advice for any

battle and is the key to winning the war against this worthy adversary from the insect world.

Termites are more likely to be seen during the spring because this is the primary period of the year when they are likely to swarm. However, termite season is really a year-round activity. Even though they are usually out-of-sight

during most of the year, they are still carrying out their mission. Most people do not become aware of these unwelcome guests until they pull out some wood and find termites or the damage they cause.

A few simple precautions will help reduce the chances of subterranean termites turning your dream





home into a nightmare. When subterranean termites invade a home, hundreds, even thousands, of dollars in damage can occur. They often go unnoticed because you don't see them crawling around. They do their damage inside the wood.

Any home can be attacked by termites. There are, however, certain conditions around your home that may create a situation conducive to termite activity.

- Correct any situations where soil comes into contact with brick, especially weep holes.
- Correct any situations where soil comes into contact with siding or any type of wood-to-ground contact.
- Do not stack firewood next to the house or garage.
- Check for areas around the home for rotten or decaying wood. Whether it's inside or outside, what looks like rotten wood could be termite damage.
- Check for areas around plumbing leaks that stay wet. Subterranean termites require a source of moisture and are very attracted to wood that stays wet.
- If you mulch your landscape shrubs located around the home foundation, be sure that the mulch does not make contact with bricks, weep holes, exterior wood, etc. This is very important and I've seen far too many cases of excessive use of mulch in such areas.

The existence of one or more of the above situations creates a very inviting and easy route for subterranean termites to gain access to homes. If you have any of these conditions, they should be corrected.

There are also certain indicators that there may be termite activity. These are situations that should be checked by a termite professional as soon as possible. The first is the presence of "swarmers" or male and female reproductives inside the home. Swarmers look like flying ants and often collect near windows, glass patio doors and other sources of light.

Termite swarmers are most common encountered in the spring. A few to several dozen may occur for a short period of time. Sometimes you only see them once and they die quickly. Swarmers found inside a home are a likely indication that there is an active colony in your home.

The second indicator is the presence of mud "shelter tubes." These are usually small tubes that range from pencil-size to larger in diameter and have the consistency of a dirt dobber nest. They are usually ascending out of the ground, up the side of a foundation to an exterior wood siding or to a weep hole in the brick. Weep holes can be found on most any brick home and serve a vital structural function. I've seen termites, fire ants, roaches, crickets, earwigs, wasps, millipedes and other insect pests take advantage of this "open door" to what amounts to a great nest site inside wall voids where it's warm, shady, moist and protected!

If you knock the termite shelter tubes down or crush them, the termites will build them back or construct other shelter tubes elsewhere. I should also note that fire ants oftentimes construct shelter-like tubes to gain access to a home's interior through weep holes (as pictured in the accompanying photo).

However, the shelter tubes constructed by fire ants easily break-down if poked with a stick or finger whereas shelter tubes constructed by termites are hard and require more pressure to break apart. You cannot get rid of termites by destroying the tubes or by spraying an insecticide on termite workers through the tubes.

If you have noticed any of the aforementioned signs indicating the presence of termites, you should contact a termite control professional. Do not panic should you find evidence of termites. Termites won't destroy your home overnight or even in a week—they work slowly.

You should, however, arrange to have your home inspected by one or more licensed pest control companies. Most companies will inspect your home for termite infestation free-of-charge and provide an estimate for treatment if an infestation is confirmed. Pest control companies are required to provide you with a disclosure statement containing the name of pesticides to be used, details of any warranties and other pertinent information.

Homeowners faced with dealing with a termite infestation will likely not be consoled when informed that termites serve a highly useful function in nature because they break down decaying wood which returns valuable organic matter and nutrients to the soil. In essence, they are re-cyclers of plant life. However, as long as we live in houses made of wood and wood products, termites will keep such dwellings on their menu list.

