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Carpenter Ants

I wanted to follow up a little bit on last weeks article. I have had several calls this week from homeowners asking me to help them identify those pesky termites. Through this process we have been finding that many of the winged bugs are actually carpenter ants. Hopefully, through this article I will be able to help you distinguish between the carpenter ant and the termite.

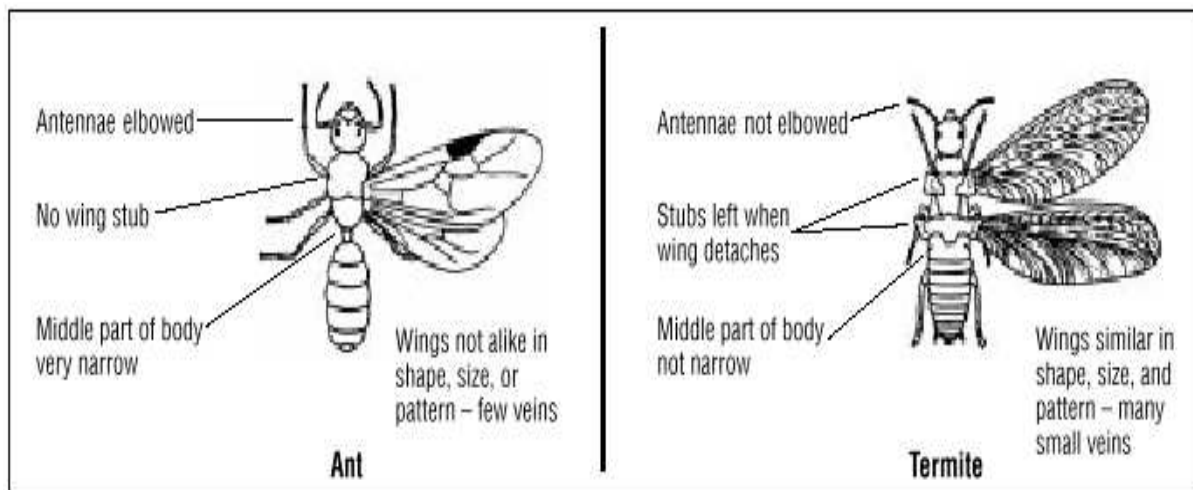
Carpenter ants are social insects that live in colonies, primarily in wood. They hollow out wood to build their nests, making their galleries and chambers velvety-smooth as if a carpenter had sanded the surfaces. Their tunneling in wood and foraging for food and water lead to their “pest” status in or around homes. Carpenter ants are an excellent indicator of moisture problems in a building, or other conditions conducive to their infestation, such as rotting wood, that need attention.

Carpenter ants are among the largest ants in the United States. Adults vary in length from about 1 /4 inch (6 mm) to 7/16 inch (18mm). The ants develop through several stages in their metamorphosis: egg, larva, pupa and adult. All stages can be found in a colony, but identification is made from the adults, which are the familiar ant-like insects with 6 legs, 3 distinct body

regions with a constricted waist, and prominent elbowed antennae. These ants vary from a solid dull black or yellowish-red to a combination of black and dull red or reddish-orange.

Winged carpenter ants resemble winged termites and, in Texas, it is not uncommon for both of these important wood-destroying insects to swarm at about the same time. It is vital that they be identified accurately, because control measures differ greatly for the two insect groups.

The difference between ants and termites are as follows: ants have small, constricted waists; wings of unequal length, with the front pair longer than the hind pair; and antennae bent at right angles about mid-length. Termite bodies are not narrowed at the middle; their wings are of equal length; and their antennae are rather straight with bead-like segments. The image below shows the distinct differences between carpenter ants and termites.



Mature carpenter ant colonies produce male and female winged reproductives from early spring to summer. Environmental conditions trigger their emergence, which may occur over several days or weeks. Mating occurs in flight, called a nuptial flight, after which the males die and the females begin searching for a nesting site. The new queen breaks off her wings either just before or after choosing the nesting site.

Carpenter ants normally build their nests in hollow trees, logs, posts, landscaping timbers and wood used in homes and other structures. Unlike termites, they do not feed on wood but merely use it as a place in which to build a nest. They prefer moist or partially decayed wood, frequently entering existing cavities or void areas through cracks and crevices.

The ants usually cut galleries with the grain of the wood, following the softer parts. They leave the harder wood as walls separating the tunnels. They cut openings in these walls to interconnect the galleries. Access to the outside may be through natural openings, or the ants may cut openings where none exist naturally.

Finally, to help prevent serious problems due to infestation of insects identification is the key. If you are still unable to identify whether you have ants or termites, please feel free to give me a call at 903-473-2412. For more information go to <http://insects.tamu.edu>