HOME AND GARDEN COLUMN

TERMITES

Keep an eye out. They'll be swarming. With the warmer weather and rain we've had this week, the termites will be out soon looking for a new place to nest. Termites are very destructive insects. It costs over $1 billion annually for control and damage repair.

Termites feed on wood or other items that contain cellulose, such as paper, fiberboard, and some fabrics derived from cotton or plant fibers. In Central Florida, there are two main types of termites that we need to be concerned about - subterranean and drywood termites. Subterranean termites are the most destructive and frequently encountered kind of termite, causing seventy-five percent of the termite damage.

Subterranean termite colonies are usually found in the soil, however, they can also attack structures. They nest in the soil to obtain moisture, but will also nest in wood that is often wet. Any wood in contact with the ground can be easily attacked by subterranean termites. If the wood does not come in contact with the soil, they can build mud tubes to reach it several feet above the ground. These tubes can extend for 50-60 feet, which allows the termites to enter a structure through expansion joints in concrete slabs or where utilities enter the house.

Drywood termites are different from subterranean termites in that they infest dry wood and do not need contact with the soil in order to establish colonies. Drywood termites also excrete pellets of partly digested wood. These pellets are cream to reddish-brown or black in color. They are 1-2 mm long and distinctively six-sided. The pellets will usually fall into piles as the termites push them out of the infested wood.

Termites remain hidden within wood and are often difficult to detect. However, they may be detected by the presence of winged adults, mud tubes, and wood damage. The winged adults emerge from colonies in great numbers usually in the spring and during daylight hours. This is when we usually first noticed that termites may be a problem. If you notice large numbers of winged termites in a house, this is a good indication of probable infestation.

Termite wings will break off shortly after their flight, so even if the actual swarming is not observed, the presence of discarded wings indicate that a colony is nearby. Because termites are attracted to light, their broken-off wings are often near doors or windows. Winged subterranean termites emerging from the ground out-of-doors near the house does not necessarily mean the house is infested, but it is a good reason to check further. Look for mud tubes that may be forming along the outside of the structures.

Chemical barriers and bait stations are available to reduce subterranean termite infestations, however, you can also help to reduce the chance of infestations by following a few other simple steps:

- Landscape plants and irrigation should not be placed within two feet of the foundation wall. Mulch should not be within one foot.
- Thorough annual inspections should be conducted to discover evidence of wood damage or termite activity such as mud tubes on foundation surfaces, discarded wings or adult termites.
- Any wood that contacts the soil, such as fence posts, poles and general foundation structures, should be commercially pressure treated, and should not be attached to house.

For drywood termites, detecting them early is the key. Localized termite colonies may be controlled by removing and replacing the damaged wood. With large infestations of drywood termites, more extreme controls will need to be taken, such as tenting and fumigating the structure. A sign of advanced infestation is surface blisters. Drywood termites sometimes tunnel close to the surface giving the wood a blistered appearance. Infestations may be detected by tapping the wood every few inches with the handle of a
screwdriver. Damaged wood will sound hollow. A papery rustling sound indicates tunnels just beneath the surface.

Drywood and subterranean termites require completely different control methods. Therefore, the termites must be correctly identified. If in doubt, bring several specimens or broken-off wings to the Osceola County Extension Office. Professional control of termites is recommended.

Information for this article was taken from the UF/IFAS publications Subterranean Termites and Non-subterranean Termites. For a free copy of these publications or for any other information, please contact the Osceola County Extension Service. The Master Gardeners can be reached at (321) 697-3000. The Master Gardeners now have new Plant Clinic hours. They are available to take calls on Monday-Friday from 10am to 2pm.

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