

Termites

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It's termite season! You've heard it on the commercials and it is true. The peak of termite swarming season has arrived. Rain and warm weather triggers swarms of termites to take flight looking for a new place to start a colony.

So, what actually are termites? Termites are the most destructive structural pests, costing more than \$1 billion nationwide in treatment and repairs. They are small insects that eat wood and live in colonies. The colony is headed by a king and queen who mate and produce more termites. These insects have microscopic organisms (called protozoa) living in their digestive tract that help them to digest wood. Termites are very important in nature because they break down wood and return nutrients to the soil. They only become a problem only when they attack our homes and structures.

There are two main termites in Florida that infest structures - subterranean and drywood. Subterranean termites usually live underground where they tunnel in the soil in search of wood. When searching and feeding above ground they build mud shelter tubes. Subterranean termites also cover the wood they infest with mud and their droppings for nest materials. Drywood termites live completely inside dead wood and never tunnel in the soil. They produce dry, gritty fecal pellets that are often found scattered or in piles near the wood they infest. .

Termites remain hidden within wood and are often difficult to detect. However, they are often discovered by the presence of winged adults, mud tubes, and wood damage. The winged adults emerge from colonies in great numbers in the spring and during daylight hours. This is when we usually first notice that termites may be a problem – and panic! If you notice large numbers of winged termites outside, it does not necessarily mean the house is infested, but it is a good reason to check further. If the swarm of termites is inside the house, it is a good indication of probable infestation.

Also keep an eye out for other signs of termite damage. 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. Outside the house, look for mud tubes that may be forming along walls and other outdoor structures.

Correct identification of the termites infesting a structure is extremely important because certain treatments are required for each. Drywood termite infestations can be difficult to prevent, however the prevention of subterranean termite infestations is quite feasible with proper treatments

The two types of prevention methods for subterranean termites include termite bait systems or chemical barrier treatments. It is not recommended that homeowners conduct their own prevention

program, especially with a termite bait system. Effective termite baiting requires training, experience, and an understanding of termite biology and behavior.

Which termite prevention program is the best? This is the most common question asked by homeowners. Unfortunately, there isn't a simple answer. Baiting and chemical barrier treatments both have advantages and disadvantages; however, one may be more practical than the other in some situations. For example, chemical barrier treatments are necessary when immediate control is needed for real estate transactions.

Generally, termite bait systems are more expensive than chemical barrier treatments. The price of a bait treatment includes an installation fee for the bait stations, the cost of the bait and stations, plus the service of having the pest management professional perform routine inspections of the bait stations both during and after baiting.

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 more information on termites and termite control methods, please contact the Osceola County Master Gardeners at (321) 697-3000. They are available to take calls Mondays thru Fridays from 10am to 2pm.