**HORTICULTURE COLUMN**

**TERMITES**

Wings on the window sill warn of termite infestation. Get the facts before you panic.

*Termites* eat wood and have been known to damage homes and furnishings, but they don’t work as fast as the Tasmanian devil cartoon character. You have some time to investigate before calling in pest control’s version of the National Guard.

Termites natural function is to eat wood. They are decomposers and help keep us from being neck deep in dead wood, stems, sticks and other plant debris. However, just as wood is a major component of the insect’s home, wood is also a major component of our homes. The insects are good at finding food but don’t distinguish between dining at our house and theirs.

Termites live in colonies with several classes of termites to share responsibilities. The workers hunt for food and keep the colony clean while the soldiers guard against enemies. The queen of the colony’s prime function is to lay eggs to expand the size of the colony. She is an egg laying machine.

There are several types of termites which are common in Florida, but subterranean termites prefer to live in large colonies in the ground where soil is moist and they find plenty of cellulose or plant fibers to feed on. When the colony gets to a certain size, they produce winged adults that fly off in swarms to mate and create a new colony. The warm weather after the cold snap triggers subterranean termites to swarm.

Florida building codes require chemical treatment of soil around and under new homes to prevent termite damage. Pre-treatment with a termiticide is easier than treating after the home is built. Chemical is sprayed onto the soil before the slab is poured and is drenched into the holes in concrete blocks and around the outside walls.

As the colonies expand in the soil, it is difficult for them to know that they are not invited guests so they often sneak in through untreated cracks in the floor to feed on wood floors, drywall paper, wood framing, window trim or furniture. Even books and cardboard boxes are a tasty meal fit for a queen, or even a worker.

Proper treatment with adequate chemical helps to prevent termites from entering the home. However, there are other things that should be done to prevent subterranean termite damage. Bob Crawford, Commissioner of the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services makes the following suggestions:

- Maintain gutters and downspouts to discharge water 18 to 24 inches away from the foundation of your home.
- Channel air conditioning condensate drainage away from the house.
- Keep the roof in good repair; stop leaks immediately.
- Keep mulch and landscaping away from siding.
- Keep irrigation away from siding and foundation.
- Don’t pile wood against the house or in the garage.

In addition, be sure all wooden form boards, cardboard and paper is removed from around the house. Don’t bury this type of debris in the soil around your house. Why invite termites to a smorgasbord in your yard?

Building industry representatives, pest control companies and government inspectors are in the process of
modifying building codes to prevent situations which provide food for termites or which disturb the chemical termiticide barrier. Anything which stirs up the treated soil such as installing landscape plants or modifying plumbing layout can destroy the termite barrier and allow the creatures to tunnel into your home.

If you have termites swarm in your house, you have time to get more information. If you have a termite contract, read it carefully. Be sure you understand the details. Does it cover retreatment and repair of damaged wood at no cost to you? What are the dollar limits? What are some things you may accidently do which void the contract (such as putting mulch too close to the house?)

If you don’t have a current contract, consider the treatment and termite contract as insurance. Termites can damage the expensive investment in your home. There is more to compare than just the cost. Look at the coverage. What is the length of the contract? How much is renewal? Use a reputable business. Do some investigating before signing on the bottom line.

Call the Osceola County Extension Service at (321) 697-3000 for more information on subterranean termites and selecting a pest control business. Check out our consumer horticulture web page for termite links. Also check out the Department of Agriculture’s web page. There is helpful information for consumers and information on proposed changes to the building code.

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