PLANT LIFE COLUMN

TERRIBLE TERMITES

Rain and warm weather triggers swarms of termites to take flight for romantic encounters as they set out to create new families.

While termites outdoors are decomposers vital to the natural cycles of life, bugs in the home arouse feelings of fear deep to the core of home owners. It is estimated that termites cause about $2 billion in treatment and repair costs each year.

Fight back and prevent infestations by creating the best defenses around your home. The new termite protection code written as part of the new building code (to go into effect later this year) includes recommendations to help reduce structural damage caused by termites.

You don't have to wait for the code to go into effect to do the right things. Start now to prevent problems and make your home less attractive to termites.

Florida's sandy soils and mild climate are ideal for termite development. Termites grow into colonies of several million individuals. As we build into natural areas we often build our homes on top of their huge nests which extend up to an acre in size.

Our homes make ideal food for termites. Wood framing inside walls, paneling, cabinets, books and book cases, boxes, paper, cardboard, furniture, paper backing on insulation and decorative trim all contain wood based cellulose which is termite food. They feed on wood products but concrete and steel structures are not immune termite infestations because there is plenty of wood indoors if they get inside.

Subterranean termites need moisture to survive. They usually move into homes through cracks in the floor slab or through hidden access points. Since termites need no more than a 1/64 inch crack to gain access to our living space, it is easy for them to move indoors and share our home.

Chemicals can be applied to the soil before the concrete floor slab is poured. Several products are labeled for use but the University of Florida suggests using products which are non-repellant, so the insects actually have time to come in contact with the toxic chemicals and spread them throughout the colony.

While chemical application is the most common method used, best management practices to prevent or reduce subterranean termite damage should also include reducing moisture buildup and limiting access through better construction techniques.

Contractors need to remove all wood form boards and grade stakes from the site. Wood debris from construction and land clearing should not be buried on the property near the home. Instead, grind the wood and use it as mulch around landscape plantings. Always pull mulch away from plant stems and keep the area next to the house free of mulch.

Recommendations vary, but leave at least 6” of bare soil next to the foundation of the home for easy inspection. This will allow you to watch for mud tubes which termites build to move into wood above ground. Recent research has shown that gravel or mulch next to the house walls provide easy access for termites if the perimeter pesticide treatment is not adequate.

Wood siding, brick veneer, exterior insulation and stucco should not be applied in contact with the soil. Leave at least a 6” clearance above the soil so you can look for the tell-tale mud tubes as signs of infestation. Existing problems should be taken care of as soon as possible.

Termites prefer homes without gutters because the soil adjacent to the house stays moist after rainfall. Downspouts should direct rainwater into planted areas located away from the building. Rain splashing can
disturb the treated soil around the perimeter of the building rendering pesticide treatments ineffective.

Air conditioning condensate drain lines should discharge at least 1' from the building foundation to keep moisture away from the foundation.

Landscape irrigation should be installed at least 1 feet from the building and spray away from the foundation to keep moisture of the walls and to allow for good air circulation.

Landscape plants nearest to the house are called foundation plantings. They are generally designed to help break up the monotony of solid walls for aesthetic reasons. Using "termite sense", it is best to move foundation plantings at least 3’ away from the house foundation to allow for mature size of the plants and still provide air circulation between the plants and the building. Greater distances are even more advantageous since research has shown that termites follow the path of roots which can grow up to 3 times the spread of the branches of trees and shrubs.

Termite treatment companies should be called in to retreat outside around the foundation after landscaping is finished and mulch is spread and any time soil is disturbed.

Don't use untreated wood for fences or additions attached to the house. Termites will even eat treated wood products when necessary for survival.

Crawl spaces under manufactured houses must have vents to let moisture escape.

Take actions to make your home less attractive to termites. They are ever present in the soil around us, but we don't have to hang out the welcome sign and invite them in.

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