

Formosan Subterranean Termites and Termite Control

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Much of this information was developed by the LSU Department of Entomology and is available on their web site at www.lsuagcenter.com/termites.

Formosan subterranean termites are considered to be the most destructive insect in Louisiana, causing millions of dollars in damage every year. These termites are becoming more common around Baton Rouge, with large numbers in Bluebonnet Swamp, so many Oak Hills residents noticed the swarming of these termites last month. Swarming is when large numbers of adult winged kings and queens leave their parental colony and fly away to mate and establish new colonies. Formosan subterranean termites usually swarm during May, peaking around Mothers' subterranean termites are common in trees around Oak Hills and also swarm during this time, but during the day, so they are less conspicuous. Formosan subterranean termites, in contrast to native subterranean termites, are able to establish colonies above-ground, such as in wet wood in attics or in trees, so detection often is more difficult.

After mating and landing, adult termites shed their wings and seek suitable locations to start new colonies. Adult termites do not chew wood (but did as immature termites), and their offspring will chew wood until they mature.

There are a number of ways to reduce the risk of termite infestation. Residents can and should turn out outdoor lights (or change color of lights to yellow) and keep window shades drawn during the evening and night (as much as possible) to minimize attraction of termites to houses. However, a few de-winged adult termites crawling on the floor or countertops during the swarming period is not cause for alarm. These adults will die childless if they don't find suitably damp wood in which to start colonies.

The best control for all termites is to check regularly for any leaks from pipes or roof that could create suitable conditions for colony development and feeding. Once established, termites forage from their colonies, building mud tubes to maintain moist trail conditions as they feed, and will eat any cellulose material, including wood, paper, and organic mulch. In addition to preventing damp wood in the house, keep wood piles, scrap wood, mulch and shrubs several feet away from the house to avoid proximity of termite food sources and to keep the foundation of the house visible for easy detection of mud tubes. Termite contractors are trained to recognize termites and to prevent or to control and repair damage. Everyone should have a termite contract for their house unless trained to recognize and certified to treat termites themselves.

There are two major types of contract termite control:

1. Perimeter barrier treatment with a termiticide. Termidor and Premise are two commonly-used barrier chemicals. A trench is dug around the house and filled with the termiticide, then backfilled. The chemical-soaked soil presents a barrier to termites tunneling toward the house. It is very important that this barrier not be disrupted by planting or covering with new soil or mulch, as these activities will allow termites to cross the barrier. The house and premises should be inspected by the termite contractor at least once a year, and the contract and barrier treatment renewed every five years or so. For additional insurance cost, any termite damage found during the contract period will be repaired at no additional cost.

2. Bait stations (invented by LSU AgCenter Entomologists) have a piece of wood connected to a spring. When termites chew through the wood, the orange lid pops up, revealing their presence. Stations are positioned in the soil at intervals (usually 10-20 ft) around the house. When the lid pops up, the wood is replaced with a toxin-soaked substrate that the termites take back to the colony, killing all members of the colony as a result of food-sharing. It is possible for termites to enter houses between bait stations, but the advantage of the stations is that termites are easily detected when a bait station pops its top.

Another strategy being tested by LSU AgCenter Entomologists is creating a barrier to termites by planting vetiver grass around the perimeter of houses or other structures to be protected. Vetiver grass produces chemicals that repel termites, and the deep roots provide protection several feet into the soil. Vetiver grass is available at some local nurseries.

A key to termite control is having as many houses as possible in the neighborhood participating in a termite contract. Swarming termites typically do not fly long distances from their source, so the more houses that are protected by contracts, the fewer termite sources in the neighborhood to spread to other houses. Check with neighbors or friends to see which termite control companies they use and if they are happy with their service. Interview several companies to see which will provide the kind of contract you desire.

More information is available at www.lsuagcenter.com/termites.