

## **Termites, the great wood destroyers?**

Home inspectors frequently get requests for inspection of wood destroying organisms. Most of us have seen TV shows or pictures of large-scale insect damage, and this can shape our thinking and perception of wood-destroying organisms (WDO). WDO covers a large genre of beetles, ants, bees, fungi, and termites. The most destructive of these little critters are termites. Termites are scavengers and actually play an important role in the breakdown and cleanup of dead or rotted wood in our ecosystem. However, they sometimes seem discontent with staying in the woods and end up in our homes.

Termites are the most destructive, in part, because of their “social nature”. They exist in large colonies and have an organized division of labor. A typical colony has between 60,000 -80,000 members with some swelling to an estimated 2 million. Within these colonies, the termites are divided into workers, soldiers, and reproductives. A nymph or “newborn” termite has the ability to develop into any of the previously mentioned groups, depending on the current needs of the colony.

Subterranean termites are the most common termites in this area of the county. They primarily make their colonies below ground and then search for food. Occasionally, you can see thin, round tunnels made from mud and saliva, snaking along concrete foundation walls, or along joists in the basement or crawlspace. The tunnels are usually about the thickness of a pencil, and provide a pathway to food sources, (i.e. your structural framing). The tunnels protect them from enemies, such as ants, and have a regulated temperature and humidity to help them avoid drying out and dying.

If you see a large swarm of winged, small, black, insects, you have discovered the swarmers that are sent from the colony to establish new colonies. Other signs of swarmers are discarded wings on or around windows. This usually happens in April-June and is a likely sign of infestation.

If you think you have termites in or around your home, call a licensed termite inspector for confirmation. A typical colony can eat a 2 foot piece of 2 X 4 in one year. That doesn't seem like much, but if left untreated, obviously they can create lots of problems. They are sometimes very difficult to detect, because they eat wood starting in the center and work their way out. By the time they are discovered, there can be significant damage.

Treatments from pest control companies are quite effective and usually are guaranteed for up to 5 years. The type of treatment depends on the severity of the problem, type of house, and location of the problem.

There are actually some companies that have termite-sniffing dogs (beagles) that will find termites where no human could. You can buy one of these trained canines for a mere \$28,000.