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2009 banner year for termites, experts say

Swarms bigger, more numerous in area this spring unknown

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It's not exactly the biblical plague of locusts, but this is termite swarming season in Southwest Florida, and by many accounts, it's a bad one.

Specifically, we're talking about subterranean termites, whose swarming season runs from February through May, with a peak in March and April.

"This has been the biggest year since I've been in business," said Conrad Burns, owner of Burns Pest Eliminators. "The swarms are bigger, more compact and more numerous. Frankly, I don't know why."

Three kinds of termite inhabit Southwest Florida, subterranean, dampwood and drywood, with subterranean being the biggest threat to homes (though when a house is tented for termites, it has been infested by drywood termites).

Dampwood and drywood termites swarm in the summer.

Southwest Florida has two kinds of subterranean termites, which cause more than \$2 billion in damage a year nationwide: native Eastern subterraneans and nonnative Formosan subterraneans.

While there are more than 2,800 termite species worldwide, the Formosan subterranean termite is the most widely distributed.

Scientists first described it during the early 20th century in Taiwan.

By the 1960s, it had reached the United States, and in 1980, a colony was found at a condominium in Broward County.

A colony of native subterranean termites can have several hundred thousand individuals, while a colony of Formosan termites can contain several million.

"The Formosans tend to have larger colonies," said Mike Page, chief of the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services' Entomology Bureau. "Therefore, the damage has a high potential of being greater. It's not that they eat more - that's a false assumption - but their colonies are larger and can do more damage."

Whether native or nonnative, subterranean termite colonies are made up of workers and soldiers, which have no wings, and winged reproductives.

As their name suggests, subterranean termites live in underground colonies, and during swarming season, reproductives emerge in large numbers, mate and then form new colonies.

"During swarming season, a lot of people schedule an appointment, but the swarming stops, and they cancel," Burns said. "They think that because the swarm is over, the termites are no longer present. That's certainly not the case."

So, why is this such an active swarming season?

"I think what might be going on is that there's a whole lot of dead pines out there from the drought and attacks from bark beetles," said Phil Stansly, an entomologist at the Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences in Immokalee. "So there's a ton of food out there for them."

"So there's an increased risk. It's like throwing seeds out there. The more you throw, the more likely they'll find a happy home."

Although termites remain hidden while they're gnawing on the wood of a house, infestations can be detected by such evidence as presence of swarmers, discarded swarmer wings on window sills or in spider webs, mud tubes and wood damage.

Homeowners should not try to get rid of termites by themselves, Page said.

"Termites are cryptobiotic - they get into places where most people can't inspect," he said. "Licensed pest control companies understand the biology and behavior of termites. They know where to look, and they know how to get into the construction types used in this state. So we recommend to go with a professional."

Additional Facts

TERMITE PREVENTION

- Remove all stumps, roots, wood, and similar materials from the building site before construction is begun.

- Remove all form boards and grade stakes used in construction.

- There should be no contact between the building woodwork and the soil or fill. Exterior woodwork should be located a minimum of 6 inches above ground and beams in crawl spaces at least 18 inches above ground to provide ample space to make future inspections.

- Ventilation openings in foundations should be designed to prevent dead air pockets and of sufficient size to assure frequent changes of air - at least 2 square feet to 25 running feet of outside foundation wall. This helps keep the ground dry and unfavorable for termites.

- Landscape plants and irrigation should not be placed within 2 feet of the foundation wall.

- Thorough annual inspections should be conducted to discover evidence of wood damage or termite activity such as shelter 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.

Source: University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences
