

Brad Tipton

Extension Educator, Ag/4-H Youth Development & C.E.D
Canadian County OSU Extension Office
Phone 262-0155, Fax 262-2267
E-mail: brad.tipton@okstate.edu

Termite Season

April and May are the peak times for swarms of subterranean termites to appear throughout Oklahoma. These flights consist of anywhere from hundreds to thousands of mature reproductive 'king' and 'queen' termites looking for suitable environments to begin new colonies.

Once these swarming termites land, a 'king' and 'queen' will pair up and search for cracks in the soil, an old tree stump or openings in the foundations of homes. If the habitat is suitable for starting a colony, the 'queen' will then begin to lay eggs near a cellulose food source such as wooden buildings or dead trees.

Even though termite swarming can occur in the fall of the year, spring offers the most conducive time for new termite colony establishment. However, the September and October time frame for termites to successfully reproduce new colonies is not as consistent as spring swarming.

Termites seem to strike fear into every homeowner. But, in nature termites are actually very beneficial and play an important role in recycling dead wood back into the soil, enhancing soil aeration and improving soil nutrient levels. Termites also make up a critical food source in nature when fed upon by birds, reptiles, mammals, spiders and other insects like ants.

However, termites only become problematic when they infest our wooden structures. Left unchecked these unwanted guests can cause serious structural damage and expensive repairs.

Just because termites are seen swarming around the outside a home does not mean the home is infested. Presence of swarming termites does mean that there is a risk of becoming infested.

When swarming termites are seen inside a home, then it is almost certain that termites have taken up residence in that home. That is unless a door or window was left open during swarming and these termites simply flew in from the outside.

Termites shed their wings shortly after landing and begin searching out a hiding place. Finding hundreds of wings around window sills, door frames or on table tops is not a good sign because this indicates the swarming termites have likely hidden themselves away in walls or other crevices in the house.

Being a soft bodied insect, termites need high humidity conditions to avoid drying out and dying. Therefore, the most likely places to find termites inside the home will be in the bathroom and kitchen near water pipes or traps. The need for moisture is the reason termites create earthen tubes when they leave the soil and go up through foundations in search of cellulose.

Before panicking, a homeowner needs to make sure they are dealing with termites and not ants. Termites can easily be distinguished from ants by knowing the different characteristics of each. First, ants have a very narrow segment connecting the thorax to their abdomen while a termite appears to only have two body segments.

Likely an easier way to distinguish an ant from a termite is the antenna. Antenna of an ant is 'elbowed' or bends while the antenna of a termite is simply curved without a 45 degree angle. If a homeowner is unsure of the identity of what they think is a termite, they should seek professional advice from either the county extension office or a pest control company.

The first rule of termite management is sanitation. Look for mud in foundation cracks, earthen tubes running up crawl spaces or walls. Also, wooden debris around the home is just the ticket termites need to gain a foothold and infest a wooden structure. Pieces of wooden planter boxes, dead shrubs, cardboard or bark mulch up against exterior walls can harbor termites. Keep firewood stacked away from the exterior of a structure and up off the ground.

Another thing many homeowners overlook when it comes to termite sanitation is rain gutters and water drains. Water standing in gutters and continuously wet soil around or under the home creates great conditions for termites to survive and proliferate. Until sanitation and water problems are first eliminated it will be impossible to manage and remove a termite infestation.

A pest control company may need to do an inspection to determine the significance of a termite infestation and prevent serious damage. Then, when control measures are needed, the homeowner will have two choices for control that include liquid termiticides or a baiting system to address termite issues.

Proper termite management treatments to wooden structures require specialized tools, equipment, liquid tanks, hoses, pumps and extensive training to be done properly, whether the homeowner chooses a termiticide or a bait type treatment. Basically all the effective termiticides and bait systems are only sold to licensed pest control companies for use by state licensed applicators and not the general public.

Reputable professional termite pest management companies will inspect a home for a reasonable cost and develop a termite management plan based on the severity of the infestation. This inspection by experts is invaluable to making the proper decisions for controlling termites.

So, when you see the black swarm of termites circling your home this spring there is no need to panic. Simply stay vigilant and look for signs of termites. The warning signs come when swarming termites are found inside a dwelling, mud tubes are found or stains appear on sheetrock walls that have a vein look to them. Also, anytime you have a soft spot on a wall that you can poke your finger through it is time to seek professional help.

Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service offers its programs to all eligible persons regardless of race, color, national origin, religion, gender, age, disability or status as a veteran and is an Equal Opportunity Employer. The information given herein is for educational purposes only. References made to commercial products or trade names are with the understanding that no discrimination is intended and no endorsement is implied. Oklahoma State University, U.S. Department of Agriculture, State and Local Governments cooperating.