

FastFacts

About Termites

by Mariangela Pfister

Most folks welcome the return of warmer weather. However, warm weather can sometimes also herald the return of termites. The spring is a good time to investigate whether or not your old (or even your new) building has termites, because they tend to swarm (fly around to mate and establish new colonies) in March, April, May and June, although they also occasionally swarm in September and October. The focus of this FastFacts is on subterranean termites, the variety most commonly found in Ohio.

First, here's a little information about the insects themselves. Subterranean termites live together in colonies in the soil, unlike carpenter ants that can actually live in the wood of your home. Each colony consists of swarmers (reproducing termites), workers and soldiers. Termites actually eat your wood or wood products (anything containing cellulose), whereas carpenter ants tunnel through it looking for places to nest. However, both actions are highly damaging to wood. As I mentioned, termites will attack anything containing cellulose, but they are particularly fond of damp wood. Wet wood is a favorite of many pests. As a result, it's essential that your building is kept as dry as possible. Measures you can take to achieve this are discussed in this article.

Investigation is always the first tool in combating any building problem. Look carefully for signs of swarming termites. Another telltale sign of these damaging insects are the mud tunnels or tubes they create on foundation walls or between cracks in wood.

These little mud tunnels differ from caked-up mud in that they actually resemble tunnels and will stretch from the ground right up into your wood or between the top of your foundation and the beginning of your building.

Another signal that termites are around is if your wood sounds hollow when tapped or is spongy or soft when gently probed with something sharp.

If you find evidence of termites, don't try home remedies to treat them. Termites are tenacious and the chemicals used to kill them can be toxic. Contact a reputable pesticide company, one that will guarantee its work without hidden charges or fees. Ask other building owners who they have used and with what degree of success, and check with your Better Business Bureau. Since termites leave some surface wood in place, it's really difficult to tell if they've been completely exterminated, so it's very important to work with a pesticide company that will return if needed. It's also really important to be vigilant in monitoring your building even after you've had it treated for termites.

If you've not yet found any evidence of termites, consider yourself fortunate, but don't be complacent. Monitor your old or new building frequently for the signs of termites I've mentioned in this article. Avoid moist wood, which both termites and carpenter ants relish. Keep your roof, gutters and downspouts free of debris and in good working order. Slope the ground away from your home so that water is able to drain away from your foundation, however, be very careful not to pile your soil up so high against your foundation that it touches or even comes close to the wood of your home. If the soil is too close, the termites will use it as a bridge into your structure.

Do not use wood mulch against your foundation. Termites will attack soft or hard woods so the type of mulch makes no difference; all varieties are attractive to termites. And since it is the purpose of mulch to hold moisture to the soil, it is perfect for termites and for carpenter ants, who also love moist wood.

Don't stack any type of wood close to your building. Termites can easily transfer from the firewood you keep handy on your back porch directly to your porch columns or flooring. Take care when you bring wood in from the outside to insure that bugs aren't stowing away to gain entrance to your home.

However, by far the greatest way to reduce your exposure to termites is to keep all areas of your building dry, well ventilated, and well painted.

Above all, don't panic. Termites chew slowly. It takes them a long time to cause serious damage. However, if left unattended; they can cause costly repairs, especially to structural members of your building. So even if you have a masonry building, it's very important to be vigilant against these pests. By taking the measures I recommend in this *FastFacts*, your building

can be insect-free and sound. As we stress in almost all our *FastFacts*, a dry and well-maintained building is a healthy building!

For more information about winning the battle against termites, contact the Ohio History Connection's State Historic Preservation Office.

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