



Termites— characteristics and control

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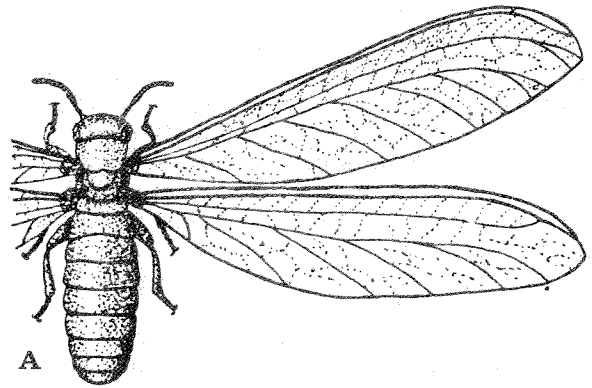
Quick Facts

The subterranean ground-nesting termites are the species usually responsible for damage to structures in Colorado.

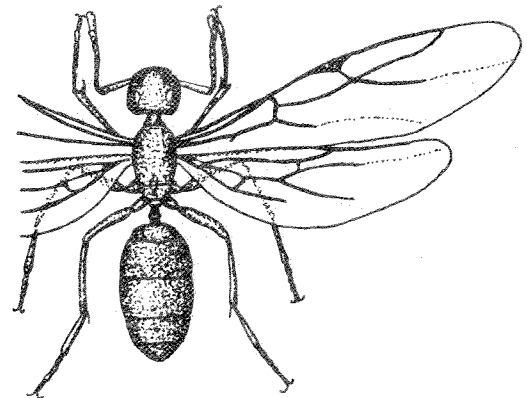
Termites are distinguished by a broad waist, straight, bead-like antennae and both pair of wings of equal size.

Infestations can be detected by the sighting of winged forms emerging inside a building, flattened earthen tubes from the ground up over foundations and wood yielding a dull thudding sound when tapped.

If an infestation is found, try to locate the point of entry and call a licensed pest control operator.



A



B

Figure 1: Winged termite (A); winged ant (B).

Description

Termites are small to medium-sized, soft-bodied insects that live in colonies and feed on wood and wood products. In these colonies, different individual types or castes are responsible for specific tasks involved in colony maintenance. Each caste has a distinctive appearance.

The form of termites most commonly seen is the winged (alate) form. These are produced in great numbers at specific times of the year, usually spring or fall. These are the new kings and queens that leave the colony in large groups, fly briefly, mate and form a new colony. If these appear inside a structure, an infestation is present. Before a new colony is formed they break off their wings, leaving only a small stub where the wings were attached.

Winged termites often are confused with ants, especially carpenter ants. There are several distinguishing characteristics (Fig. 1). In termites, the abdomen is broadly attached to the thorax or leg-bearing portion of the body. Ants have a pinched-in, narrow waist. Termite antennae are straight and when examined closely, look like a string of beads. Ant antennae are bent or elbowed.

The wings of termites are equal in size and shape while the second pair is noticeably smaller for ants (see related Service in Action sheet 5.554, *Carpenter Ants*). Worker and soldier castes are wingless and unpigmented. They usually are not seen unless there is a break in the nest structure or connecting tubes. Soldiers are distinguished by their larger heads, which may be hardened and dark in color. Their jaws are larger than those of workers.

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Detection

Termites can be classified into several types based on the type of nest they construct. The most important type in Colorado is the subterranean ground-nesting termite, usually responsible for damage to structures. These termites usually maintain contact with the soil in which the main nest is found. They search outside their nest for wood to feed on and construct earthen tubes from the nest to the food source.

Nests appear to be designed to maintain high humidity. Termites very quickly die from loss of body fluids if exposed to outside conditions for very long. A break in the nest structure will quickly be detected and repaired by workers.

The most common way to detect termites is spotting the winged adults emerging from inside a building, generally in the spring or fall. Termites often fly to windows or other light sources. Other less common signs of infestation are ¼- to ½-inch wide earthen tubes from the soil over foundations, masonry or wooden supports; or wood lines with compacted earth-like material confined to the sapwood that yields a dull thudding sound when tapped.

Prevention

Preventative measures can be taken to protect wooden structures from termites. There should be no contact between wood and the soil. All waste wood should be removed from the building site and buildings should not be placed over waste wood burial sites. Also, cinder blocks, bricks or other hollow masonry in contact with wood and soil should be moved or capped shut with reinforced concrete or a metal shield. Any crack or gap in the foundation or plumbing is a potential point of entry and must be sealed. Wooden shingles or supports should have at least 8 inches of

clearance above the soil or the termites may construct connecting tubes above ground for a short distance. These tubes are visible signs of an infestation. A chemical barrier can be used to prevent termites from reaching wooden structures as they tunnel through the soil. This is most effective when applied during construction stages although injection holes can be drilled to introduce insecticides to the soil around and, if necessary, underneath a completed structure. The soil-applied insecticides can effectively deter termites for many years. As with other types of termite control, these procedures are best left to a professional pesticide applicator for the most effective control.

If an infestation is discovered, don't panic—a new colony grows very slowly. The invasion of a structure from a well established colony can be rapid. It is important to obtain a reasonable assessment of the problem before control methods are undertaken. Locate the point of entry and contact a reliable pest control operator. Use the same care in selecting this service as you would for any other service for your home.

References

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