

Termite control— the danger within

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, termites cause at least \$500 million in damage every year. How can you protect your home from this destructive wood pest? First, know a termite when you see one: Many people mistake these invaders for ants.

The differences between the two—for spotting purposes—are threefold. Ter-



A mature female termite, sometimes mistaken for an ant, is shown at the left. The most salient distinction between the two insects is that compared to ants, termites have thicker midbodies.

mites are paler than ants, their midbodies don't narrow, and they only nest in moist areas—such as soil abutting your redwood deck or trellis. But be warned: Termites have wings during their final developmental stage; they discard these during early spring and through summer, when they mate and develop colonies.

As a precaution, check areas around windows and doors periodically; if you spot discarded wings, it's time to act. However, not finding any discarded wings doesn't mean your home is safe; you should also strip away some finish siding or trim to examine wood underneath for honeycomb areas, gray specks of earth, or mud tubes.

If by mischance you harbor a colony, Ernest Regnia at the Pesticides Division of the Environmental Protection Agency recommends that you call in a professional exterminator. Never try to smite out the enemy yourself. It's chemical warfare all the way, and only a person knowledgeable about the exacting specifications for mixing and applying the solution should deal the deadly blow.

In the past, exterminators would apply any of the following toxic chemicals to destroy termite colonies: aldrin, chlordane, dieldrin, and heptachlor. Dieldrin is now banned for commercial use by the EPA and, depending on the state you live in, so may all or some of the others. Generally, though, they are restricted for

use. For instance, because chlordane is so highly effective against termites, it takes 30 years for the compound to break down in the environment. It is usually still available for subsurface use, but in a highly diluted form. Another pesticide, dursban, has been tested to be, so far, a little more than half as effective as chlordane, but testing continues.

So what we have here is a dual-edged sword: The longer traces of a pesticide remain in the environment, the more effective—and possibly dangerous—it is. Scientists, therefore, are seeking alternatives in the form of termite-eating worms and genetically engineered pesticides that would render chemicals obsolete.

Until then, act with caution. Ask your exterminator what he uses for termite control. If it's a substance banned by the EPA, let your fingers do the walking until you find an exterminator who follows the rules. And if you have any questions regarding proposed treatments, call the Pesticide Hotline at (800) 531-7790, or, in Texas, (800) 292-7664.

But let's face it, an ounce of prevention is always worth a gallon of cure. So never leave loose wood in a pile on the ground. Replace damaged flooring promptly, and fill all cracks and gaps in your foundation with cement grout or coal-tar pitch. Proper drainage, such as eave gutters and downspouts, and adequate ventilation for foundations and crawl spaces discourage the formation of colo-



Termites may build a network of tubes along foundation walls to shelter themselves from light and air as they travel from the soil up to the food source—the wooden parts of a building.

nies and prevent dead air pockets.

If all that sounds like a lot of trouble, just remember the headache you may be in store for if you take a cavalier stance. And don't forget that \$500 million figure; the USDA expects that number to inflate in the near future. MICHAEL THOMSETT ▶