

[badbugs]

NO ONE WANTS A FIRSTHAND EDUCATION in the habits of bugs that eat houses. But knowing the enemy is crucial, both to guard against unnecessary repairs and to judge exterminators' proposals. Many insects are pests, but termites and some beetles are the ones that inflict the most damage. Even with termites, though, the degree of concern ought to match the critter. Subterranean termites, the most common type, nest in the ground. They travel through wood that touches the soil, through cracks in slab foundations or through mud shelter tubes that look like brown rope the width of a pencil.



termite or

flying ant? An ant has a thin waist, elbowed antennae and hind wings smaller than its fore wings. A termite has a broad waist, straight antennae and two pairs of same-sized wings.

Swarms, often containing thousands of termites, appear mostly on spring days in the East and during early fall in the West.

Formosan termites, on the other hand, are the killer bees of structural pests. A type of subterranean termite, the culprit looks so much like the common termite that scientists did not recognize it as a separate species until 1965, well after it was brought here on boats from Asia. Still found only in southern coastal areas and in Hawaii, Formosan termites form huge colonies that can cause significant damage in only 90 days.

Free of the need for moist soil or wood, the drywood termite is especially difficult to prevent or detect. Usually the only sign is fecal pellets piled up under damaged wood. The size of poppy seeds, pellets show six distinct ridges when examined with a magnifying lens. Swarming occurs from spring through fall, usually at night, and as few as a dozen may swarm at once. Drywood termites generally cause less damage than subterranean termites.

Dampwood termites include three

families. All feed on very moist wood, although the Pacific coast type, the largest termite in the U.S., can extend its foraging into dry wood. Dampwoods give few signs of their presence and are usually detected by probing wet wood. Swarming times vary.

Unfortunately, a house inspection may also turn up signs of carpenter bees or powderpost beetles. Carpenter bees look like bumblebees. In spring, females chew tunnels in bare wood, then deposit eggs in chambers separated by walls of wood pulp. Usually only trim or siding is damaged; dark streaks of fecal material often appear under holes. Males are feisty but can't sting; females are shy but do sting. Damage and the characteristic streaking can usually be seen from the ground.

Several types of powderpost beetles can convert the inside of a stick of wood to powder and pock the exterior with tiny holes. Some species attack only hardwoods, favoring wood less than 10 years old for its starch content. Others infest both hardwoods and softwoods. The chart at right introduces some of them.



WORKER TERMITE:
Chews wood and feeds other members.

SOLDIER TERMITE:
Uses its enlarged head to close off tunnels to ants and its mandible to fight other termites.



SUBTERRANEAN TERMITE:
Wings have only two distinct veins and a few hairs.

FORMOSAN TERMITE:
Wings are hairy.



DRYWOOD TERMITE:
Wings have three or more dark veins and no hair.



DAMPWOOD TERMITE:
Typically feeds on very moist wood.

CARPENTER BEE:
Looks like a bumblebee, but the top of its abdomen is shiny, not hairy.



GOLDEN BUPRESTID BEETLE:
Gets noticed because of its metallic sheen. Afflicts dead or dying trees, and homes built with contaminated wood.

LYCTID POWDERPOST BEETLE:
Attacks only hardwoods, especially oak, ash, hickory, mahogany and walnut. Favors wood less than 10 years old.



CARPENTER ANT:
Does not eat wood, but can cause damage if colonies nest in walls.

ANOBIID POWDERPOST BEETLE:
Infests hardwoods and softwoods, usually in poorly ventilated crawl spaces.



HORNTAIL WASP:
Does not sting, but can pepper the walls of a new house with holes.

BOSTRICHID POWDERPOST BEETLE:
Favors woods seldom used for framing; infests indoor woodwork, albeit rarely.



OLD HOUSE BORER:
A destructive variety of cerambycid beetle that infests seasoned wood.

ROUND-HEADED BORER:
Larval stage of an old house borer.



LONG-HORNED BEETLE:
Adult phase of an old house borer.

