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Start of Termite Swarming Season

There are two subterranean termite genera that cause most of the structural damage in Texas. One genus, *Reticulitermes*, will become noticeable as the reproductives begin swarming during the day in the spring. Termites are social insects and have a caste system consisting of workers, soldiers, and winged reproductives. Each caste member within a termite colony has distinct physical and behavioral characteristics.

Termites feed on any cellulose material, such as roots, paper, and cardboard. They are important to our ecosystem since they decompose cellulose. However, subterranean termites become economic pests when they invade human dwellings and structures.

Subterranean termites live in colonies underground, in order to avoid sunshine and outside air. The workers build the shelter tubes from tiny pieces of soil, wood, and debris that are glued together using secretions and fecal material. Termites tend to have an extensive tunneling system underground that allows them to carry food resources back into the colony.

Termite damage may be detected by the presence of mud tubes, damaged wood, and the swarming of winged termites. Termite damage may also be apparent on door frames or window sills, or dead termites might be visible along window sills or baseboards.

Some Control Options:

Some Preventative Options:

- 1)) Stumps, scrap wood, grade stakes, foam boards, cardboard boxes, and newspapers found around structures should be removed.
- 2) Firewood, landscape timbers, compost piles should not be stored around foundations.
- 3) Minimize moist areas by grading the soil and installing gutters to allow water to drain away from the building.
- 4) Do not allow shrubs, vines, tall grasses and other dense vegetation to grow against structures. Thick vegetation makes it hard to inspect for termite activity, and these plants tend to trap moisture.
- 5) Use mulch sparingly and do not allow the mulch to contact wood siding or framing of the doors/windows around the structure.

Some Chemical Approaches to Termite Control:

If termites are found around structures some measures, such as applying liquid termiticides and installing baiting systems, can be taken. Soil termiticides provide a continuous chemical barrier around the structure. There are both repellent and non-repellant liquid termiticides that can be applied around structures. The termites attempting to tunnel into the treated area will either be killed or repelled, thus preventing them from entering the structure. Termite baiting systems can also be installed around structures and in conducive conditions within the area. The stations will usually contain a piece of untreated wood initially until termite activity is detected. Once termite activity is observed, then the untreated wood is replaced with a plastic tube containing a termiticide. The termiticide in the bait systems is found within the cellulose matrix. The worker termites feed on the cellulose matrix and then take the material back to the colony to exchange this material with other members of the colony. This results in death of colony members.



Picture of a winged reproductive termite, *Reticulitermes* sp. (Isoptera: Rhinotermitidae).
Photo by J. Hamer.

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