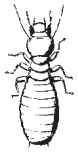
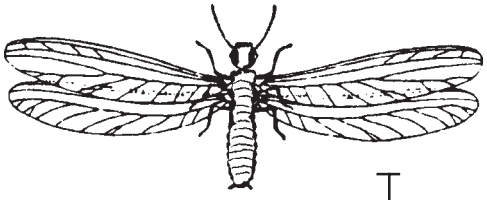
PEST CONTROL BULLETIN NO. 39

TERMITES

Soldier Termite



Worker Termite



Flying Termite
Reproductive

Flying Ant

GENERAL INFORMATION

Termites are social insects that form colonies with "castes" of individuals that perform specific functions to the overall benefit of the colony. There is a single large "queen" and abundant "workers" that excavate tunnels, tend to the queen, and rear the young. Colony defense in maintained by a specialized caste of "soldiers" that possess large heads and exaggerated jaws (mandibles). When conditions are favorable following periods of rain, winged "reproductives" emerge form the colony to mate and establish new colonies.

Termites are common insects found throughout southern California where the mild climate provides ideal conditions for their establishment (infestation) in wooden structures. There are two species of economic importance due to their association with damaging the wooden components of houses, buildings, and fencing. These species go by their common names as the western subterranean termite *(Reticulitermes hesperus)* (1/4" in length) and drywood termite *(Incisitermes minor)* (3/8" in length). Homeowners can limit termite damage to their property by becoming familiar with termite habits and exercising a few simple preventative measures.

SUBTERRANEAN TERMITE

The western subterranean termite causes substantial damage to wooden structures throughout southern California. This species requires moisture and feeds on wood either in direct contact with damp soil or indirect contact whereby they construct earthen tunnels upward from the soil to the exposed wood. The ability to construct "connecting" tunnels enables the subterranean termite to proceed upward through cracks in concrete slab flooring to gain access to wood. The winged reproductives are dark brown or reddish with distinct black heads.

DRYWOOD TERMITE

The drywood termite, which resembles the subterranean, is larger and the winged reproductives have a reddish versus black head. Despite the fact that both the subterranean and drywood termite attack wooden structures with equal frequency in southern California, the damage brought by the drywood termite is considerably less. The drywood termite can become established anywhere within the wooden frame of a home because this species is less sensitive to low humidity and does not require ground contact via earthen tunnels.

EVIDENCE OF A TERMITE INFESTATION

Swarming of winged reproductives often indicates the nearby presence of an established colony. Simply the presence of reproductives does not mean that a colony is present somewhere within the home or outbuilding because termites also infest decaying tree stumps, logs, dead branches, and wood either stacked in ground contact or buried.

The existence of a termite infestation in a wooden structure includes the presence of earthen tubes from the soil to wooden sills and floor joists (subflooring), and blisters or darkened areas on wooden flooring. Often an audible "hollow" sound is produced when infested wood is lightly tapped using either a hammer or screwdriver handle. Heavily infested wood can be pierced with ease by an ice pick or screwdriver. Drywood termites can be detected by the presence of their fecal pellets ("frass"). The sand grain sized fecal pellets are barrel-shaped with distinct ridges and colored straw to reddish. Frass typically is expelled from tunnels or galleries through small opening is exterior surface of the infested wood.

Flying ants frequently are mistaken for swarming termite reproductives. Upon close inspection, differences between flying ants and termites becomes quite obvious. Termite reproductives have front and hind wings (dark brown) of equal size while the front wings (clear) of ants are distinctly larger than the hind wings. The antennae of termites are "straight" while those of ants are "elbowed." Also, compared to flying ants, the body of termite reproductive does not have distinct divisions (constrictions) between the head, thorax and abdomen (refer to illustrations).

PREVENTATIVE MEASURES

Termite infestations are favored by a combination of moist soil conditions and the presence of accessible wood. The following practices should significantly reduce the likelihood of termites becoming established on your property:

1. Grade area around buildings to prevent accumulation of moisture. Maintain good ventilation beneath wooden substructures. Do not allow shrubbery to obstruct vents. Avoid prolonged irrigation or leaking faucets close to foundations.

2. Remove buried stumps, logs, and roots from building site. Remove scraps of lumber from crawl space beneath buildings. Do not include wood scraps in earth to fill porch, step, terrace, and patio areas. Completely remove foundation forms and grade stakes following construction.

3. In planning construction, see that no wood comes in contact with the ground. Follow the specifications of the California Building Code in regard to termite shields, minimum clearance between substructure and site grade, and ventilation.

CONTROL

The extent of a termite infestation and damage to wooden structural components is best assessed by an experienced pest control contractor specializing in termite inspections and control options. The contractor may either recommend a "spot" treatment for a localized infestation or more aggressive "tenting" when an infestation involves major structural components. Please, *do not panic* if termites are found infesting the wooden structures of your home. Termite damage under normal circumstances occurs at a very slow rate over a long period of time.

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