

The New York Times

April 30, 2006

Circulation 1,682,644

FENDING OFF TERMITES, A SPRINGTIME SCOURGE

By JAY ROMANO

OVER the next few weeks, homeowners may find thousands of half-inch-long semi-transparent wings littering the floor, basement or patio. The wings are a remnant of the annual mating frenzy engaged in by termites, one of the planet's most resilient pests.

"Termites are swarming big time this year," said Michael F. Potter, a professor of urban entomology at the University of Kentucky, in Lexington. "Swarming is the way new termite colonies are formed. Thousands of winged insects are vented from an existing colony, they land, their wings fall off, they pair up, excavate a cell in the ground and start making a new colony."

Termites, Dr. Potter said, need moisture and cellulose to survive. To get moisture, they usually make their nests in the earth, and to get cellulose, they eat wood. Sometimes it's an old tree. And sometimes it's your house.

"When you find evidence of a swarm inside the house or near the foundation, you could have a problem," Dr. Potter said.

He added that since termites usually commute to work, another sign of their presence is mud tunnels — enclosed termite highways about the size of a drinking straw — from the ground up the foundation and into your most valuable investment.

What to do?

"Don't panic," Dr. Potter said. "Termites damage wood very slowly, and it pays to take the time to call a few companies, interview them and then make an informed decision."

Bob Davis, an entomologist at BASF in Raleigh, N.C., which makes termite-control products, said that basic strategies were spelled out by the Termite Institute, which BASF sponsors (termiteinstitute.com).

A barrier treatment, Dr. Davis said, uses chemicals injected into the ground to repel termites headed toward a house. Another treatment employs slow-acting lethal chemicals that

the termites don't notice. They crawl around freely, get the chemicals on their bodies and share them with the buddies who groom them. And then they die, taking some of their groomers with them.

Chemical treatments can cost \$1,000 and up, said Ron Harrison, an entomologist at Orkin's headquarters in Atlanta.

Another tactic is to use termite bait stations. "We place a series of bait stations about 10 feet apart in the soil around the house," said Arthur Katz, the owner of Knockout Pest Control in Uniondale, N.Y. The stations contain pieces of wood that termites will usually find and eat.

"We check the stations every month, and if we find activity, we replace the bait with a termiticide," Mr. Katz said. The termiticide — he uses Sentricon — does not immediately kill the termites. Instead, the foraging workers ingest it, regurgitate it and charitably share it with their nest mates, wiping out the entire colony in about 60 days. The cost of treatment for an average house is about \$1,500.

Dr. Harrison, the Orkin entomologist, said that while all three methods work, none work perfectly. Both barrier and lethal chemical treatments are effective if the termites come into contact with the chemicals. But if there are gaps, they may use them to get to the house.

And while baiting systems can kill a colony of termites, Dr. Harrison said, there are two things to consider. First, since termites are blind, they have to bump into one of the stations to find it. And second, even if one nest of termites finds one of the stations and is wiped out, there may be another nest on the other side of the house that is blissfully oblivious to the bait stations.

Dr. Potter of the University of Kentucky said it usually pays to buy a service agreement from a pest-control company that guarantees subsequent treatments if the original one fails. Such an agreement can cost \$100 to \$350 a year, depending on the cost of the initial treatment.

