

EATING YOU OUT OF HOUSE AND HOME Termites uninited guests in Rockport

ROCKPORT - Kay Wilson saw it coming. One by one, almost all her neighbors had fallen victim to it, so she knew she and her husband eventually would get it, too.

"Why did God give us termites?" Wilson recalled asking pest-control specialist Bob Albin of Albin Exterminating.

"So I could send my kids to college," he replied.

All joking aside, Wilson's Rockport home is one of the area's 50 or so reported cases of Formosan subterranean termites, an aggressive, destructive kind that swarms when summer begins. Fortunately for the Wilsons, they found their unwanted visitors early enough to attempt effective treatment.

"I'm not worried," Kay Wilson said. "Bobby has assured me that we caught them in time."

"We've probably treated 20 homes," Albin said. "The more people can find out about these, the better they can handle it."

Formosan Termite History

*Formosan subterranean termites were introduced to North America after World War II, when infested supplies returned to U.S. ports from the South Pacific.

*They were not identified until the 1960s, and the population ballooned in the late 1980s after the Environmental Protection Agency banned Chlordane, a popular treatment at the time, because chronic exposure was found to damage the nervous system, digestive system and liver. It also caused cancer in lab animals.

*In 1997, Rockport's first two cases of Formosans were discovered.

*Today, the destructive insects are thriving in 11 states — and 22 counties in Texas — and are most prevalent in Rockport, where more than 50 cases have been reported. One case has been reported in Robstown. There are no reported cases in Corpus Christi.

Sources: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Texas A&M University

What They Are

Formosans made their way to the United States after World War II, when infested supplies returned from the South Pacific to U.S. ports.

Since then, they've been most noticeably problematic in New Orleans, where they have cost the city between \$300 million and \$350 million in damage, primarily in the French Quarter. Nationally, Formosans have destroyed almost \$1 billion worth of property.

While a regular subterranean termite colony might be in the hundreds of thousands, Formosan colonies are in the tens of millions, according to Grady Glenn, a research entomologist with Texas A&M University.

"There's a big difference there," he said. "(Formosans) eat living trees, shrubs and crops."

Formosans also are more resourceful, building a spongy supply of water - called carton - out of salivary material, wood and waste. And if not eliminated, these termites work very efficiently.

"After two years, a Formosan termite colony can structurally devastate your house - two years!" said Debbie Aguirre, owner of Elite Exterminating in Corpus Christi. "They turn your house into cardboard. It's like a horror story, really."

After the first Formosan termite settlers came to this country from Asia, they took advantage of the U.S. commerce system, traveling undetected aboard shipments of timbers, tree balls and old railroad ties, Glenn said.

Once transported to an area, the bugs travel in swarms, moving inland by catching winds off the coast. The first two Rockport cases were discovered in 1997. From one of those two sites, researchers can trace a cone of activity. The Wilsons live in that affected area.

"This is the worst environment you could have for termites, and the reason is that we have no winter," said Roger Gold, another entomologist with the university, adding that the destructive bugs benefit mankind by using cellulose and producing nitrogen.

Detection and Treatment

Wilson had her eye out for signs of Formosan subterranean termites after she learned of her neighbors' infestations. Her first clue was hiding in a flowerbed near her front walkway.

After having trouble with some new plants not growing, she saw a dirt trail clinging to a nearby baseboard. These tunnels, or shelter tubes, let the termites move from the soil into a wall. With a pen, a homeowner - or even a squeamish newspaper reporter - can break the tube and witness the onslaught of termites.

Other signs of termites include moisture damage and disfigurement or pinholes in sheet rock, wood or baseboards, according to **Bob Davis**, an entomologist in Austin.

It's also possible to dig down in places where wood touches soil and see termites. The most likely imposters for termites are ants, but a trained eye can tell the difference - an ant has a strong constriction on its body, but a termite looks like a bowling pin, Davis said.

Exterminators differ in their preferred treatments. The best approach depends on the individual case. Most experts now say fumigation alone isn't adequate and that some type of pesticide, such as **Termidor** or Premise, works best, though pest controllers sometimes combine different methods to ensure success. Treatments vary in price, but Albin put the average at between \$1,000 and \$1,500.

Regardless of the strategy, it's important to call a professional when dealing with termites.

"You need a good, trained set of eyes to do the inspections over time," Davis said. "Termite control can be pretty complicated."

Contact John Powell Metz at 886-3763 or metzj@caller.com

Bob Albin/ Albin Exterminating

Left untreated, Formosan subterranean termites can cause serious damage, as they did in this Rockport home. To the right of the wood is carton material, a spongy supply of water termites make from saliva, wood and waste.

Termite (tur' mlnt) n. [Latin: termes, wood-eating worm] Any of numerous pale-colored soft-bodied social insects (order Isoptera) that live in colonies consisting usually of winged sexual forms, wingless sterile workers, and soldiers, feed on wood, and include some which are very destructive to wooden structures and trees.

— Merriam-Webster

Roger E. Gold/Texas A&M University Shelter tubes, such as this one in this Rockport garage, indicate a termite infestation.

Prevention

To help prevent being attacked by Formosans, Grady Glenn, an entomologist with Texas A&M University, offers these tips:

- Make sure you don't have your soil above the slab line of your home.
- Slope moisture away from your house so there's no standing water around the perimeter.
- Have your house inspected regularly, both inside and out, especially where there are plumbing access panels.
- Create a barrier around your house with a good termiticide.

Bob Albin/Albin Exterminating

In this Rockport home, Formosan termites feasted on wood near a plumbing line sleeve, which was the insects' point of entry.

Online resources

- The U.S. Department of Agriculture is conducting several projects on Formosan subterranean termites. Go to www.ars.usda.gov/is/br/fullstop
- Texas A&M University is a leading institution in researching termites. Go to termites.tamu.edu

• A termite defense product called **Termidor** is becoming increasingly popular as an effective, long-lasting treatment. Go to www.termidorhome.com