

Landscaping, Home Maintenance Helps Prevent Termites

Environmental Focus



Termites live in the soil and feed on wood. Their soft bodies also need an ample moisture source in the soil. It should come as no surprise that a high percentage of termite infestations get started from wood-soil contact, where wood touches or is imbedded in the soil. Thus, homeowners should be aware actions they take can influence termite infestations positively or negatively.

Termites are attracted to homes with moisture problems from leaky gutters and downspouts, or where water collects next to the foundation in low areas. Fix leaky gutters and make sure downspouts carry water away from the house.

Dead roots of trees or shrubs are prime termite food. If shrubs or trees have been planted next to the house and later removed, these roots can serve as a bridge for termites to cross, even if the house has had a barrier treatment. It is best to avoid planting large trees or shrubs close to the house so roots can't grow next to the foundation.

Termites feed on wood mulch. You may not want to

spread wood bark or chips next to the house. How far away from the house? We don't yet have a recommendation, because no research on this has been done, but it makes sense to be careful. A recent study in Ohio showed that there were fewer termites and other insects in mulch from softwoods (like cedar, cypress, redwood, pine) suggesting that the resins in these woods may make them not

as good a food source as hardwoods. Whether this outcome will continue after weathering breaks down and leaches the resins in the mulch, remains to be studied.

If you need to sink a post into the ground, surround it with concrete to protect it from termites. Or, use pressure-treated wood that will withstand termites, carpenter ants and decay for decades. (BPO)

Install Nest Boxes for Birds Now

Installing nesting boxes for birds is an easy way to help create habitat in your yard. Many species of birds require a cavity in which they build their nest, lay eggs and raise their young. Some species, like woodpeckers, can excavate their own nesting cavities in the trunks of decaying trees. Others will take advantage of abandoned woodpecker holes, or natural cavities created by broken branches. Other species require the tall meadow and prairie vegetation to weave and hide their nests.


Human impact on the landscape has resulted in the removal of many dead and dying trees (called snags) and the mowing over of much of our natural grassland areas. As a result, many bird species have fewer natural places to raise their young.

Providing habitat by preserving and restoring the natural plant communities is the best way to provide for nesting birds. You can also install a nesting box

to provide a place for birds to raise their young. Here are some helpful tips to guide you through the process of buying or building your nesting box, installing it and maintaining it.

- Install your birdhouse BEFORE the nesting season begins. Mid-to-late-winter (late February) is best for most areas.
- Boxes built of untreated wood are best.
- Your box should NOT have a perch—perches are unnecessary and allow predators access to eggs and nestlings.
- Hang your box from a pole with a predator guard—hanging boxes in trees allows predators easier access and can harm the tree.
- The box should have drainage holes in the bottom, ventilation holes toward the top (but not in the roof, or water will leak in) and a hinged side to allow easy access for cleaning and monitoring.
- You can score the inside walls

see NEST BOXES on page 11



Termite Control Workshop May 22

Do you have an ongoing termite problem that is giving you a major headache? Are you a new homeowner and want to know more about how to inspect your own home? Get answers at a three-hour workshop, "Everything Homeowners Need to Know about Termites and Termite Control." It will be held at the Lancaster Extension Education Center, 444 Cherrycreek Road on Thursday, May 22 from 6:30-9:30 p.m. Cost is \$20. Barb Ogg, Dennis Ferraro and Clyde Ogg will discuss termite biology and behavior, home inspection tips, differences between bait and barrier treatments and why termite treatments cost so much. Call 441-7180 for more information.

Carpenter Ants: Indicator of Moisture Problems

Carpenter ants are social insects that live in colonies, primarily in wood. They use their mouthparts like tiny wood chisels to hollow out wood to build their nests. Because they tunnel in wood and forage for food and water inside the home, they are pests. But to the astute homeowner, carpenter ants can also be an indicator of moisture problems or rotting wood that needs attention.

Identification

There are two carpenter ants found in Nebraska. Black carpenter ants are large, black ants. Adults vary in length from 1/4 to 1/2 inch for a major worker and the queen is even larger. There is another carpenter ant in Nebraska that is a smaller ant, about 1/4-inch. We call it the "red" carpenter ant to distinguish it from the black carpenter ant, but it is really two-toned. The thorax is reddish brown, the head and abdomen are darker.

Folks start bringing winged carpenter ants to the extension office in the late winter and throughout the spring and summer. These winged ants are queens and kings. If the colonies are in outdoor locations, the mated queens fly off to start new colonies. When there are winged carpenter ants in the house, it indicates that there is probably a colony in the structure somewhere. Folks also see carpenter ants inside the home when there is a colony outdoors and foraging workers enter the house, looking for food. Carpenter ants forage on a

wide variety of food items and can sometimes be a nuisance in the kitchen. When you see wingless foraging ants, there is no way to know for sure if the colony is outdoors or indoors. More investigation is needed.

Nesting Sites

Carpenter ants normally build their nests outdoors in hollow trees, logs, posts, landscaping timbers. Unlike termites, they do not feed on wood, but merely use it as a place in which to build a nest. They prefer moist or partially decayed wood, frequently entering existing cavities or void areas through cracks and crevices.

Occupied galleries are kept immaculately clean. Ants push sawdust out of the nest to keep it clean so piles of sawdust underneath the nest are a sign of a colony. This sawdust is not always visible, because colonies can be hidden in wall voids.

Carpenter ants nest inside our house structure when wood is very moist or previously damaged by water or termites. A colony develops best in wood with moisture content above 12 to 15%. This requires the wood to be wet by rain, leaks, condensation or high continuous relative humidity.

- Typical interior nest locations include:
- Wood affected by water seepage from plugged drain gutters, damaged flashing, wood shingle roofs, poorly fitted or damaged siding, improper pitch of porch floors, between the roof and ceiling of flat deck porches, hollow porch posts and columns or leaking door and window frames;
 - Areas around plumbing in kitchens and bathrooms where water leaks have



Carpenter ant nest in cellulose insulation inside exterior wall below window

- occurred, soaking the surrounding wood;
- Wood in contact with soil, such as porch supports, siding and stair risers;
- Wood in areas of poor ventilation or condensation such as cellars, crawl spaces, attics or under porches;
- Wood scraps in dirt-filled slab porches;
- Voids under bathtubs or hot tubs;
- Hollow wooden doors, hollow ceiling beams, hollow shower and curtain rods;
- Sill plates and floor joists;
- Voids under attic insulation or under insulation in crawl spaces;
- Voids above windows, doors and bay windows;

Management

The key to successfully managing carpenter ants is find the colony. Inspect the structure thoroughly, both inside and out. Carefully examine the areas listed above for signs of carpenter ants. Conical piles of shredded wood debris are an excellent indicator of a nest site.

Eliminating a carpenter ant colony can be difficult for the homeowner—especially when the colony is hidden inside a wall. Because of the association between moisture and carpenter ants, eliminating the source of the moisture may help control the colony. Replacing

damp or decaying wood will often get rid of the colony making the use of insecticides unnecessary. Other tips to prevent carpenter ants include;

- Repair plumbing or roof leaks promptly and replace damaged wood;
- Make sure there is proper clearance between soil and structural wood;
- Provide good ventilation under the house and in the attic;
- Drain water away from the structure;
- Remove stumps, logs and wood debris near the house;
- Store firewood away from the house;
- Trim back any tree or shrub limbs touching the structure;
- If possible, treat carpenter ant colonies within 100 feet of the house;
- Keep exposed wood in good condition, with all cracks, knot holes, checks or joints properly sealed with wood putty and all surfaces painted.

Insecticide Treatments

Using liquid "ant sprays" is not effective because most ants are in the colony and will be unaffected by the treatment. Generally the treatment inside wall voids involves using an insecticidal dust that the ants crawl through and contaminate the colony. This is often best left to the pest control professional because they have the equipment and expertise to do treatments properly.

If you see ants and are unsure whether they are carpenter ants, you can get a free identification by bringing several intact specimens to the Lancaster County Extension office between 8 a.m.-4:30 p.m. weekdays.

Source: Carpenter Ants, Roger Gold, Texas A&M University. (BPO)



Black carpenter ant



Black carpenter queen



Red carpenter ant