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Extension Solutions for Homes and Gardens

by Paul J. Pugliese

“It’s Termite Swarming Season!”

Termite damage and control costs in Georgia exceed \$125 million annually. Every residential landscape in Georgia has termites somewhere in the yard helping to break down decaying wood, old stumps, and other organic matter from accumulating up to our necks! Most termites native to Georgia will be swarming from now until early June. They swarm when a percentage of the termites within a population become adults and fly away to start a new colony. If you see a swarm in your house, don’t panic – just get out your vacuum cleaner and then step back to assess the situation. It’s a time to make deliberate, careful termite control decisions. Most termite damage is not sudden or catastrophic. An average colony of termites only eats a 4-inch section of a 2x4 per year. The problem with termites is that they are hidden from our view behind walls and foundations and they live in groups where they find strength in numbers. Remember that termites usually damage wood slowly, and in the few weeks it might take to question and then hire a termite control professional the additional damage caused by termites is not likely to be significant. It is more important that time be taken to select a professional termite control company that will put forth their best effort toward ridding your house of termites.

If you think you have a termite infestation or have never had your house inspected for termites, you may want to talk to a licensed pest control firm. Georgia pest control operators are required to be certified and licensed by the Georgia Department of Agriculture. Weigh the control options carefully and look at price differences and contracts that are out there. The terms and conditions of termite control contracts vary greatly among companies. It’s best to study and understand each contract type before selecting one. Try to choose a pest-control operator whose contract includes a damage-repair warranty. In other words, if termites damage the house after the treatment, the pest-control operator will repair the damage at no cost. This is your “insurance” that the pest-control operator is doing everything he can to protect your home as if it were his home. If a damage-repair warranty isn’t available, make a point to be present when the termite inspection takes place and take an active part in the process. When you make a claim against a repair contract, you usually have to show that you found live termites at the site of the damage. If you find live termites, a photo or video often helps provide proof of activity. Termite control companies may also have to verify the presence of live termites.

There are no silver bullets when it comes to termite control. Current research suggests that it is not a good idea to rely solely on any single control method. Homeowners should ask their pest control operator to use a combination of methods. Termite control professionals have a variety of tools in their toolbox. There are wood treatments, soil treatments, baits and moisture control. The best control involves all four. Termite baiting tactics are less time-consuming to install, compared to conventional soil treatments and they’re often less intrusive to the homeowner. People often think you can control termites by calling someone to come out, treat your house and go away. Termite control is an ongoing process. Not an event. Termite control efforts should be centered on periodic home inspections. When termites show up, different treatments should be used for the conditions present. It’s just like a doctor prescribing medicine. The same medicine doesn’t work in every case.

The way a home was built may contribute the most to termite problems. A hundred years ago, houses were built off the ground so the wood was dry, and builders used wood types that termites didn't like to eat. In the 1950's, chemicals were trusted so much that home builders didn't worry about building in ways that protected the house from termites. So, if you live in an older home, any chemical treatments that were done during construction may eventually begin to wear off. Consequently, chemical treatments that were available 30 and 40 years ago are no longer on the market because of environmental concerns with long-term residual activity. Houses today are often built of materials that make great termite food. And they're often built in ways that invite termites. Modifying these problem areas (such as wood to ground contact) around your home is one of the most important control tactics.

Inspecting your landscape for termite-attracting features could reduce your chances of inviting the tiny destroyers into your home and your wallet. Termites need moisture and food to survive, so homeowners need to make a conscious effort to reduce conditions around their homes that attract them. Make sure your gutters and air-conditioner drip line drain away from your house. Don't aim sprinkler systems toward the house. Inspect your home foundations and crawl spaces to make sure no wood or foam board insulation contacts the ground. Rid your landscape of anything termites would consider food. Also, avoid planting shrubs and placing mulch too close your house foundation. When termites tunnel through the ground, they like to follow roots, and these can lead them right into your home's foundation. Ideally, leave a pathway large enough to walk between your foundation and your plants.

For more information on basic termite control service contracts and treatment options, check out our online publication "Termite Control Services: Information for the Georgia Property Owner," <http://pubs.caes.uga.edu/caespubs/pubs/PDF/B1241.pdf>

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