

Ants and Termites

By Carolyn Klass

A few warm days in late February or March may trigger the indoor swarming of termites and ants. Both termites and ants live in colonies, or groups, and when the colony is large enough reproductives (males and queens) are produced. In our New York State climate it often takes three to five years for a colony to produce reproductives.

Swarms of either of these insects inside the home during the late winter or early spring may be an indication of a larger problem. Termites and carpenter ants are both structural pests. Other species of ants, which are not structural pests, may also swarm in the spring. The latter are usually soil nesting species that nested near the foundation and, when temperatures warm-up, swarm through any available openings.

The first thing a homeowner should try to do is to identify whether you have ants or termites. If the insects are termites, the problem may be very serious. Termites are aptly called a "hidden enemy" because they work in the dark, inside the wood actually eating it. Damage may remain hidden until someone accidentally falls through a floor or a porch step that has been hollowed out. As the termites work they need to maintain contact with the soil moisture. They often construct mud tunnels over inedible portions of the building or foundation.

If you find termites, contact a professional pest management firm. All termite treatment in New York State must be done by certified pesticide applicators.

If you find ants, determine if they are carpenter ants. Our common species of carpenter ant is large, queens are 1/2 inch long or longer, and all black.



Termites: Antennae not elbowed, Waist not noticeably constricted, 2 pairs of wings, equal in size, Wings with many small veins.

Carpenter ants excavate galleries in the wood and use the galleries as a nesting site. In their excavation work they bite off small particles of wood and discard them. This may result in piles of coarse, sawdust-like chips near an exposed piece of wood.

Ants are active from spring until late fall. Workers can be seen very early in the spring as they forage indoors for food or water. Once trees leaf out and honeydew (a sweet sticky liquid given off by aphids and other sucking insects) is available, the ants forage out-of-doors and will be less visible.

If carpenter ants are the problem, try to find the nesting area. Sometimes you can hear them working in the walls at night, when all else is quiet. A papercup (with the bottom cut out) held against the wall can help you determine more precisely where the ants may be at work. Be aware that mice and other small animals also may make noises as they move about inside walls.

In many cases carpenter ants attack wood



Ants: Elbowed antennae, Constricted waist 2 pairs of wings, but hind wings smaller than front wings, Wings with few veins.

that is wet or that has suffered from water damage. If there have been leaks in the roof, walls, or plumbing, check these areas first. When the nest area is located, you can treat it yourself or contact a pest management service.

Replacement of structurally damaged wood and correction of any water or moisture problems are also recommended. If moisture problems are not corrected, carpenter ants might move back into the area in the future.

Soil nesting ants are a nuisance problem but do not threaten a structure. If you find soil nesting ants, try to locate how they are getting in and repair or caulk entrance holes. Ants can be swept or vacuumed and discarded. Remember to empty the vacuum bag, especially if the insects are live. ▲

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