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HOUSE AND LANDSCAPE PESTS

How to Select a Termite Control Service

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Retaining the services of a competent termite control company is important both for inspections and the treatment of termite problems. Professional pest control operators have specialized equipment, knowledge and credentials to perform these services.

Wooden structures in Texas have more than a 70 percent chance of being attacked by termites within 10 to 20 years of construction if they are not properly protected by a chemical or physical barrier. Properly treating the soil beneath the structure before construction (pretreatment) reduces the threat of subterranean termites. Unfortunately the pretreatment requirements are often not enforced, and the homeowner needs to request these treatments from the builder.

Some helpful Extension publications termites include, E-368, "Subterranean Termites," E-366, "Drywood Termites," and E-367, "Formosan Subterranean Termites." These publications discuss the identification, biology, behavior and control of termites. If you suspect you have a termite infestation, the following steps will help you select a termite control service:

Homes are prime targets for termites.

Termites may even begin attacking a home soon after construction.

Don't panic.

Termites usually work slowly, so your house will not collapse or be ruined overnight. Do not become unduly alarmed if you learn that termites are, or may be, attacking your home. Take the time to learn about termites, their biology, and inspection techniques and treatment options.

Don't make hasty decisions.

Do not permit anyone to rush you into buying termite control services. Take the time you need to make an informed decision. Delaying a few weeks makes no difference. There is always time to buy this service wisely and at your convenience.

There are, however, times when decisions need to be made quickly, such as when buying or selling a home. If the termite infestation was discovered with enough time before closing on the transaction, a treatment can still be chosen and performed to the satisfaction of the buyer, seller and mortgage company. It is better to put off a

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purchase than to rush into an incomplete or ineffective control strategy.

If you are unsure about whether your home has termites, locate reliable pest control companies and discuss their termite control services.

Arrange for a thorough termite inspection and know that the costs of inspections, estimates and terms can vary significantly among companies. Request inspections from three or more companies. Ask for recommendations from your friends and neighbors; this is one of the best ways to get an honest opinion about a termite control service.

A proper inspection should include a written report noting:

- The location of areas of active or inactive termite infestations.
- The location and number of treatments to be made to control the infestation. A diagram of the structure should be included, which is helpful in indicating the location of structural features such as porches, utility accesses and areas of wood-to-soil contact, as well as areas with drainage or moisture problems in or near the structure. These "conducive conditions" may favor termite attacks and should be identified and remedied.
- An estimated cost of control. Determine whether the estimate is a firm price, and be cautious if it is not. You must be provided a disclosure sheet which includes the information listed above along with a copy of the label of the product to be used. If you obtain more than one opinion, quote or inspection, let each firm involved know that other firms were contacted. As the consumer, you are free to compare services, but treat the companies with the same courtesy and respect you hope they will return as pest control professionals. Make sure you carefully read and understand the contract services and warranties.

Understand the various treatment methods or options.

Consumers shopping for termite control services have more choices than ever. This is good, but it can also be confusing. Control options for subterranean termites include baiting systems, chemical or physical barriers and various combinations of treatments with soil-applied liquid or foam termiticides. For drywood termites, options include removal of infested wood, "drill and treat" procedures using liquid termiticides, and whole house fumigation and heat/cold treatments.

Request a termite inspection from at least three companies.

Treatment options

One of the first decisions to make is whether to treat using a conventional soil barrier treatment or termite baits. Both approaches can be effective. Soil treatments are used to establish a "barrier" or "treatment zone" between the wood in the structure and termite colonies in the soil. They are not intended to eliminate or kill all subterranean termite colonies. The chemicals used may either kill or repel the invading termites, but either way the structure is protected if the applications are thorough. Chemical treatments should last several years under Texas soil and environmental conditions.

Baiting systems

Several baiting systems are available from termite control services. A baiting system requires a pest control specialist's knowledge about termite biology and behavior in order to install the baits correctly and aggressively monitor the process.

Some baiting systems are advertised to be able to stand alone, or be totally sufficient for termite control; others are used in combination with liquid termiticides. In general, baits require frequent visits by the pest control specialist in charge. Control may take from a few months to more than a year. Do-it-yourself baiting systems are not recommended as they are generally not equivalent to a professionally installed and maintained baiting system.

Soil barriers

The **sub-slab method**, which is used to establish termiticide soil barriers, requires that holes be drilled in an existing concrete slab and pesticide injected through a tube into the soil beneath the

slab. This method is used inside the structure, mainly where pipes protrude through the slab, as in bathrooms and kitchens. Injection also may be required along both sides of interior support walls, one side of interior partitions and along all cracks and expansion joints. At times, the pesticide must be injected through exterior foundation walls just beneath the slab, such as when treating kitchens and bathrooms from the outside. To ensure a good, continuous chemical barrier, the holes should be drilled in the slab no farther than 12 inches apart.

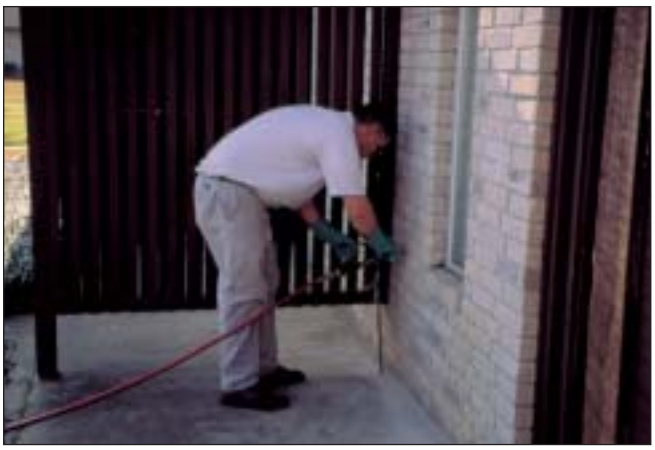
Trenching involves excavating a 6- to 8-inch-wide, 10-inch-deep strip of soil next to the outside foundation wall on slab homes. The process pulls some of the soil back from the foundation where the chemicals are applied. Trenching takes longer, but provides a more consistent barrier than rodding alone. All the soil that is returned to the trench should be treated with termiticide and thereafter left undisturbed. Homes on pier-and-beam foundations are trenched by excavating soil in an area 6 to 8 inches wide around all piers and pipes and along inside and outside foundation walls.

Rodding uses a long rod with a special tip to penetrate the soil around the foundation. The rod is usually inserted about every 12 inches. If applied properly, the pesticide creates a continuous barrier; however, rodding alone is not recommended because it can leave gaps in the treatment zone. Rodding combined with trenching is preferred.

Combination treatments involving all three of the above methods are sometimes used. Sub-slab injection may be used on porches, patios, breezeways, driveways and entryways where separate slabs exist. Bath-trap areas of slab homes and areas where plumbing and electrical lines enter the home can be treated by sub-slab injection or rodding.

Foam treatments can be used to supplement liquid applications in areas that are difficult to treat. The foam formulations should be used to treat chimney bases, dirt filled porches, wall voids and certain sub-slab areas. Foaming is not an alternative treatment for soil-applied drenches and is not suitable for treating the soil directly. Liquid applications should be made first and then foam should be used as a secondary application method.

A rotary hammer drill is used to drill holes for the sub-slab method of termite treatment.



Termiticide is injected in drill holes.

Alternative management strategies

Sand barriers can be an alternative to chemicals in some treatment situations. In some parts of the world, sand with certain size particles (1/16 inch grit) is used to physically block termite entry into structures. This technology requires considerable knowledge on the part of the applicator and is generally unsuitable for use outdoors around the base of a slab or other foundation unless the sand barrier can be held in place.

The use of mechanical barriers such as metal screens and shields, plastic barriers can also be effective if installed correctly.

Fumigants are used to treat drywood termites and aerial Formosan termite nests, which do not need contact with the soil. Fumigation requires additional licensing and certification. To control drywood termites, a structure is usually covered completely with tarps. The seams of tarps are sealed and a fumigant is introduced. The fumigant is maintained in the structure long enough to eliminate the termites. The tarps are then removed and the structure aired out before people are allowed to return. The fumigant is very effective, but after the aeration, no residual is left to control subsequent infestations.

Other control methods include removing damaged wood containing the drywood termite colony, or drilling and treating wood where colonies are located. These methods can be effective, but for major infestations, fumigation is recommended.

Heat and cold are alternative treatments on drywood termites and wood-infesting beetles. See Texas Cooperative Extension E-366, "Drywood Termites," for more complete information about treatment of drywood termites. For more information about the relative effectiveness and advantages of different control options for termites, see Texas Cooperative Extension E-368, "Subterranean Termites."

Quality assurance

Contract for services from a reliable firm. Choose a termite control service with the same care and discrimination you would use in securing any other service for your property. Always be sure you deal with a reliable firm that is licensed and certified to do the work and has an established place of business. Here are some ways to investigate before you invest:

- Ask for identification confirming that the person offering termite control is certified and licensed by the Texas Structural Pest Control Board. Certified applicators and technicians are required by law to carry identification issued by the Board, and service vehicles must bear a Texas Pest Control License number that is permanently affixed to the vehicle.
- If a firm offers references of previous work, take time to check them carefully.
- If the firm is located in your area, make sure it has an established place of business, which can be checked through the Chamber of Commerce or Better Business Bureau.
- If the firm is from out of town, it is even more important to make sure it is reliable. Check that it has an established place of business in the town where it claims to be located. Most fraudulent operators work in communities where they are not known. Ask for references and check them carefully. Reliable firms welcome this approach.

Beware of firms that:

- Quote a price based only on the number of gallons of material used.
- Profess to have a secret formula or ingredient for termite control (all termiticides must be registered by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency).
- Have no listed telephone number.
- Show up unexpectedly and use evidence of termites in trees, fences or other nearby houses as an excuse to inspect the house.
- Also want to trim trees and do general foundation repair work as part of the "deal."
- Cater to elderly or infirm people who live alone (relatives and neighbors should warn elderly people to beware of people who knock at the door and propose to do service work, including treating the house for termites).
- Claim to be endorsed by Texas A&M University or any other state agency.
- Claim to have excess chemical left over from another job and offer a reduced price if they can do the treatment immediately. Texas requires a 3-day "cooling off" period to protect consumers in any home solicitation.

Know the legal Structural Pest Control Board requirements for termite inspections and treatments.

Inspections conducted to establish the need for treatment may be made using the company's own form; however, inspections made for real estate transactions must be reported on the "Texas Official Wood Destroying Insect Report" form. Following a real estate inspection, a durable sign must be posted at or near the water heater closet, electric breaker box, under the kitchen sink or the interior of the bath trap access. This sign must

Fumigation is used to treat drywood termites.

give the date of inspection and name and address of the licensee who conducted it.

Before conducting a termite treatment, the pest control company proposing the treatment must present you with disclosure documents containing at least the following:

- A diagram and description of the structure or structures to be treated.
- The name of the termiticide(s) to be used along with a label for the products.
- Information on whether or not a warranty or service contract is provided.
- Complete details of the warranty provided, including:
  - Areas excluded from treatment, if any.
  - Warranty time period.
  - Renewal option(s) and cost(s).
  - Obligations to retreat or repair damage caused by termites within the warranty period.
  - Conditions that could develop as a result of the owner's action or inaction that could void the warranty
  - Signature of approval by a certified applicator representing the company offering termite control services.

Know the terms of the contract.

Review any contracts for services and if you have questions, ask the termite control specialist to provide a written statement of the proposed work and a cost estimate. The specialist must give you time to consider the estimate.

It is customary to provide a warranty on termite control work, either on a year-to-year basis or for a more extended period.

Read the warranty carefully as it is a guarantee of service, not a guarantee of the termite barrier. Do not accept guarantees that vaguely refer to termite control. Determine whether a yearly charge will be levied during the warranty period or whether these charges are included in the initial price. Find out how much it will cost to extend the warranty for additional years and ask how long it can be extended. Make sure you get copies of the contract and warranty for your records.

Remember that a warranty is no better than the person or firm who gives it to you. A warranty should not be the only evidence you consider to determine that a firm is reliable. Plan to extend the warranty for at least 1 or 2 years after the treatment is made. Make sure you know exactly what warranty the firm offers.

You will probably be asked to sign a work order or contract when you hire a firm for termite work. Understand clearly what obligations you are assuming and what you will get in return. As required by law, the name, address, and telephone number of the Structural Pest Control Board of Texas must appear on the face of each contract, warranty or guarantee issued by the pest control operator.

Re-treatments. All termiticides lose their effectiveness over time and eventually it may be necessary to have a structure re-treated. Regulations in Texas provide criteria concerning when a structure may be legally re-treated.

They include:

- If there are no records of when the initial treatment was made.
- If there is clear evidence of an active termite infestation.
- If the protective barrier has been removed or destroyed.
- If there is evidence that the chemical barrier is no longer effective.
- If it has been at least 5 years since the last full treatment.

Even following disasters, including floods, there may **not** be justification for reapplying a chemical or physical barrier.

Most firms are reliable, legitimate, and respected businesses in their communities. Always take the time to check out the company before signing the contract for services. Web sites that may be helpful to you are listed at then end of this publication. If you believe that you have been the subject of fraudulent business practices, contact the Structural Pest Control Board of Texas (512) 305-8250, or the Office of the Texas Attorney General—Consumer Protection Division at (512) 463-2185 or (800) 621-0508. There are no charges to the consumer to receive help from these state agencies.

Web sites

Texas Structural Pest Control Board:
http://www.spcb.capnet.state.tx.us

Texas Pest Control Association:
http://www.texaspest.org

National Pest Management Association:
http://www.pestworld.org

Texas A&M Department of Urban Entomology
http://termites.tamu.edu

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Revision