

'Super termites' finally hit Pinellas

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GULFPORT — The highly destructive Formosan subterranean termite has turned up in a Gulfport home, the first ever discovery in Pinellas County of the most dreaded of termites.

Rose Clarke, owner of the gray wood home in Gulfport where the termites were found, said she has been battling them for the past three years but didn't realize they were Formosan. Once a year, they would swarm inside, attracted to the light in a side room where she has her washer and dryer.

"The swarms would be in the hundreds," said Clarke, who bought the home about seven years ago. "They would cover the floor, and I'd put the light on in there and close the door and hope for them to die."

The Formosan termite is considered one of the most destructive termite species in the world because it generates large colonies that eat through wood at extremely fast speeds. Formosans were found in Hillsborough County as far back as 1991 and had landed in every major metropolitan county in Florida with the exception of Pinellas — until now.

Experts say the termites are easily misidentified by pest control companies. Clarke got her home treated numerous times over the past three years, but the termites always returned.

Last week, just a month after a treatment in June, she noticed a squiggly line in the ceiling of her laundry room. The termites had poked through again.

She called another termite company, Terminix, which recognized the species by its larger size and hairier wings and sent half a dozen to a lab at the University of Florida in Fort Lauderdale.

Rudolf Scheffrahn, a UF professor of entomology, confirmed the "super termite" beneath his microscope Thursday morning.

"We do not understand how this particular house became infested," Scheffrahn said. "Because it's not on water and there are no railroad ties or big pieces of wood around that may have helped its transport. It's a big mystery."

Some of the termites were winged swarms, indicating they had been around for at least five years. It takes that long for a colony to get established and once it does, there can be hundreds of thousands of them. They are not fast moving, but it is likely there are other younger colonies in the neighborhood around Clarke's home, he said.

Damage to the Gulfport home appears to be minimal, however, indicating they were caught before they were at their most destructive, said John Mangold, an entomologist with Terminix in Largo.

In Hillsborough County, Temple Terrace has been hard hit. The extent of the damage across the state and locally is unclear since individual pest control companies handle the outbreaks. But last year, just one company, Terminix, identified about a dozen cases of Formosan termites in Hillsborough County.

Cost of treatment — which can involve using a bait trap or injecting chemicals beneath the ground — ranges from \$800 to \$2,000, depending on the size of the home.

How Do I Know If My House Is Infested?

*Large carton nests in trees, attics, wall voids, are obvious signs of an infestation.

*Soft spots, damp or moist patches, bulges, and blistered paint or wallpaper in walls, doors, floors, and other areas may indicate termite activity underneath. Probing these areas with a screwdriver may reveal damaged wood, soil, carton, and live termites.

*Subterranean termites crawling above ground build mud shelter tubes because they do not like being exposed in the open to light and air.

How can I reduce the chance of my home being infested:

*Do not leave wooden items such as planters, tubs, trellises, railroad ties, firewood, and stakes on top of or in bare ground.

*Anchor wooden posts for fences, decks, porches, and sheds in cement so that no wood is contacting bare ground.

*Maintain a zone of at least one foot around the outside of your home that is clear of plants and other landscaping materials.

*Install rain gutters to prevent water from dripping down around the perimeter of your home.

*The ground next to your home should slope away so that water does not pool next to it.

*Remove dead trees and plants including the roots and stumps, if possible, from your yard.

*Eliminate or reduce the use of mulch and wood chips around the foundation of your home. This eliminates cooler and moist soil conditions favored by Formosan and other subterranean termites.

Source: University of Florida

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