



September 4, 2010

Originally published in
the *Contra Costa Times*

SUMMARY

Not all swarms indicate termites, and not all termite swarms indicate a structural infestation. First try to identify the insects, then check for telltale termite signs and call a professional if you suspect your home is infested.

Termite Swarms—Should I Panic?

by Ronnell Ialeggio, UC Master Gardener

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Q. Right after it rained there were all these insects flying around and the wings must have been dropping off because I was finding them on the ground. I have heard that termites do this. How do I know if I have a problem?

A. The fall season or the first rains can bring out swarms of flying termites. It is common this time of year for the winged reproductives to take flight in mating swarms in order to establish new colonies. Ant reproductives are also winged and take flight for the same purpose. A homeowner would probably be more concerned about a termite swarm than an ant swarm and they can easily tell the difference between the two by certain physical characteristics.

Termite reproductives have front and hind wings of equal length; both are longer than the body, and contain many veins. They have a broad waist or no waist at all and their antennae are not elbowed. **Ant reproductives** have front wings longer than the hind wings and

have few veins. They have a constricted waist and elbowed antennae.

Types of Termites:

There are 3 different types of termites here in California that a homeowner might encounter.

- **Subterranean** - the most common and most destructive; require a moist environment so they usually nest in or near the soil, maintaining connection with the soil through tunnels in wood or shelter tubes they construct. They are often found in wood that has wood rot.
- **Dampwood** - live and feed in very moist wood (tree stumps, wood buried in the ground, etc.).
- **Drywood** - live deep inside wood; can tolerate dry conditions and infest dry, undecayed wood including structural lumber, dead limbs of trees, etc.



“If you observe termite swarms don’t panic and don’t immediately assume the worst. ...If you suspect that your home has a termite infestation, your best approach is to have a professional inspection.”

Termites are Wood Recyclers:

Most people think termites are only pests with negative impacts but their greatest contribution in nature is the role they play in recycling wood.

Termites only become a problem when they consume structural lumber. If you observe termite swarms, don’t panic and don’t immediately assume the worst.

Assess the Situation:

If possible, identify the location of origin as that will help you assess any potential danger to your home. Look for signs of an infestation (many shed wings from reproductives, tunneling in wood, soft wood, frass/fecal pellets) or conditions within and around the building that promote termite attack (excessive wood moisture, wood in contact with soil, etc.). If you suspect that your home has a termite infestation, your best approach is to have a professional inspection.

After correct identification and a professional inspection you will be able to determine the best approach for control.

Available Publications:

The University of California has three publications that you may find helpful. They are free and you can download them from the UC IPM website.

Termites:

<http://ipm.ucanr.edu/PDF/PESTNOTES/pntermmites.pdf>

Drywood Termites:

<http://ipm.ucanr.edu/PDF/PESTNOTES/pndrywoodtermites.pdf>

Hiring a Pest Control Company:

<http://ipm.ucanr.edu/PDF/PESTNOTES/pnhirepestcontrol.pdf>