

Beware of insect pests that can reduce your home's value, says bug man

March 11 2016, by Paul Schattenberg



Subterranean termite swarmers, such as those shown here, typically emerge during the day in the springtime. according to Dr. Mike Merchant, Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service urban entomologist, Dallas. Credit: Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service photo by Dr. Mike Merchant

With arthropods being the most diverse and successful organisms on the planet, it shouldn't be a surprise that insects and their relatives have been highly successful at invading our homes, said Dr. Mike Merchant, Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service urban entomologist in Dallas.

"Insects have evolved along with humans, actually becoming specialists at living among us and off our scraps and cast-offs," Merchant said "Unfortunately, their invasion of our homes often leads to structural and other damage that can negatively impact the home's value."

Merchant has put together a "most wanted" list of those insects with the greatest potential for reducing a home's livability and value.

Termites: According to the National Pest Management Association, termites cause over \$5 billion in property damage annually throughout the U.S.

"Extensive termite damage can make floors or walls sag due to loss of structural integrity," Merchant said. "Look for small, brown or black ant-like insects with four wings. These are the reproductive forms that commonly appear in March and April. Unlike ants, they lack a pinched waist between the abdomen and thorax."

Termite damage is not typically covered by homeowner's insurance, Merchant said, and termite control is not for amateurs.

"If you suspect termites, it's best to call a professional," he said. "A professional can help the property owner identify the species and an effective control to protect the home."

In some parts of the state, drywood termites are a problem, he said. These termites do not need contact with the soil, but live entirely within wooden joists, walls and furniture.

"Treatments are very different for the two types of termites, and that's another reason to bring in a pest control professional," he said.

Powderpost beetles: Merchant said these small, black wood-boring beetles can be a major headache, especially for new homeowners in Texas and the southern U.S.

"These beetles attack hardwood only, so will not destroy a home, but can infest molding, flooring, cabinets, doors and other hardwood furniture," he said. "Look for small, round holes in wood. Active infestations are recognized by the presence of very fine sawdust coming from the holes."

He said powderpost beetles can affect the ability to sell a home as well as affect the price of a home.

"Although they will not destroy a home, powderpost beetles are reportable on state wood-destroying-insect reports required for home loans in most states. Most infestations from wood-boring beetles occur in new homes—that is homes from one to five years old that have been built with infested wood. Removing infested wood is usually the most economical solution."

Carpenter ants: These are major structural pests in some parts of the country, especially the Pacific Northwest, Merchant said.

"While they don't eat wood, the well-muscled jaws of carpenter ants are fully capable of hollowing out solid pine or fir lumber to make nest galleries," he said.

However, he added, this is not so true in Texas, where our species tends to avoid the hard work of boring into wood and contents itself with living in void areas inside hollow doors, behind insulation and in softer styrofoam insulation panels.

"Nevertheless, carpenter ants are considered wood destroyers in most states and are also reportable on real estate transactions," Merchant said. "And even mild-natured southern carpenter ants can be quite a nuisance when they forage indoors looking for water and sweets."

Honey bees: "These insects are great outdoors—in a hive kept by a beekeeper—but can become expensive 'homewreckers' if they build their colony inside walls, floors, attics or crawl spaces of your house," Merchant said.

Within a few days of finding their way indoors, a bee colony of 30,000 bees can build a several pound hive, he explained. As the hive continues to grow, it becomes a sizeable mass of wax, honey and propolis, also known as bee glue.

"If a hive is not removed after being killed by insecticide, he said, the nest will leak fermenting honey, melted wax and dead bees. It will also attract insect scavengers, moths and rodents."

He said a significant part of the cost of bee extermination is the removal of the nest.

"Make sure whoever you hire has experience and knows what they are doing," he said. "You may be able to get someone to extract the bees alive, but this isn't always practical and it usually costs more. You shouldn't feel guilty about exterminating a wild bee nest where it's not wanted."

Fire ants: A major pest in the southern U.S., fire ants reduce both the aesthetic and recreational value of your home, Merchant said. They can damage transformer boxes, air conditioning and other electrical relay switches, causing power outages.

"The good news is that fire ants are not that difficult to control," he said. "The first step should be to broadcast one of many excellent fire ant baits over your entire lawn. When collected by foraging ants, fire ant bait particles are carried to all colonies in the yard and shared with the queen and other ants to kills them.

"The second step is to directly treat any ant colony that needs immediate control. Applying an insecticide or other treatment directly to a fire ant mound is the fastest way to get rid of most fire ant colonies."

Merchant said using this two-step technique will reduce the number of ant colonies and the risk of damage. For detailed information, see The Texas Two-Step Method fact sheet at citybugs.tamu.edu/files/2015/02/L-5070-1.pdf

German cockroaches: "Having these insects in the home is both repugnant and unhealthy," Merchant said. "Research has shown that children growing up in homes with German cockroaches are more likely to suffer from allergies and asthma."

He said German cockroaches require a vigorous cleanup effort and careful use of baits.

"If you do these two things right, sprays are not usually needed for good cockroach control."

Merchant also recommended the free AgriLife Extension publication "Cockroach Biology and Management," which can be found at [www.agrilifebookstore.org/Cock ... ement-p/ento-037.htm](http://www.agrilifebookstore.org/Cockroach-Biology-and-Management-p/ento-037.htm)..

Bed bugs: These undesirables reduce the attractiveness and livability of any home, Merchant said.

"While bed bugs are not known to carry disease, their presence is highly undesirable and causes soiling of bedding, home and furniture," he said. "I recently spoke to a prospective buyer of a very expensive home who was considering backing out of the deal because she found out the previous owner had had bed bugs. Fortunately, the owner had hired a good company with experienced staff who did all the right things, and had records showing that the problem had been taken care of."

Merchant said those unfortunate enough to have bed bugs in their home should seriously consider hiring a pest control expert. In the meantime, he said, additional suggestions and information about control can be found at [citybugs.tamu.edu/factsheets/b ... g-stinging/bed-bugs/](https://citybugs.tamu.edu/factsheets/b...g-stinging/bed-bugs/).

Provided by Texas A&M University

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