

Summer's Worst Pests

By: Anne Erickson

You can always tell when it's summer at my house. Not because of the homegrown flower arrangements in vases, or the gourmet dinners whipped up on the grill. Summer arrives at my home with no such magazine-cover prettiness. You can tell it's summer at my house when you see the columns of tiny ants marching across my kitchen counters.

When temperatures rise, pests perk up. "Insects are temperature-dependent. When weather gets cold, their metabolism slows and when the weather warms, their metabolism increases in activity so we see more activity in the warm months," says Greg Bauman, Technical Director of the Professional Pest Management Association.

When your place becomes a summer home for insect pests, the results can range from a mild nuisance to the complete destruction of your home. Watch out for these bad bugs of summer.

Termites

Termites can wreak havoc on your home—these insects eat wood. "They destroy more homes than fires or floods each year, with annual damage in the \$2.5 billion range," says Bauman. And here's the rub: They're hard to find, even when they're digesting your subflooring. How to identify them: The bugs themselves generally have an off-white body, and a thicker "waist" than an ant. Their antennae are straight, not bent, and flying termites have four wings that are all the same length. Termites swarm once or twice a year during warm weather to mate, and you may see them then. But you generally do not see the ones that are tunneling through your home.

So how do you find these home wreckers? Walk your home's perimeter once a month, and look for small mud tunnels on the foundation. Termites build these for covert, humid access to your wood. Also look for broken-off wings and sandy, wood-colored termite droppings.

Preventative measures include making sure the wood part of your house has no contact with the ground. This means keep walls free of dirt piles, don't let trellises or plants bridge from the ground to the siding, and don't stack firewood against the house. Even thick wood mulch can provide cover for termites, so make sure your bark chips aren't piled up around your wooden porch rails. Also keep moisture away from the foundation and repair leaks around structural wood. You see rotted wood where the downspout leaked onto the siding; a termite sees a free buffet.

Ants

That whole ant/picnic thing isn't just a marketing creation: Ants, like other bugs, get active when the temperature rises. And the more than 20 different types of ants that may invade your home in the summer may do anything from march through your food with their dirty little feet to destroy the wood.

Bauman says ants are the most difficult pests to control. As much as I am obsessed with the little guys colonizing my countertops, carpenter ants are the ones you should be on the lookout for. According to Bauman, carpenter ants are generally larger than other ants and have one node between the abdomen and the thorax (the point between the rear and middle segments of the body—get out your magnifying glass). Carpenter ants also have circles of hair on the tips of their rears. And Bauman cautions, "Carpenter ants are not all black...some are reddish, brownish, or even a combination."

Carpenter ants occasionally will swarm inside a house. If this happens, it's a sure bet that there is a nest within the structure. A more likely scenario is that a homeowner will encounter the 1/4- to 1/2-inch-long ants crawling about inside the home at night. These ants don't eat wood; they just hollow it out to create galleries, or nests. Look for shredded bits of coarse sawdust under slits in wood, or if you think something is infested, tap on it with a screwdriver. It may sound hollow, or you might even hear the sound of disturbed ants rustling inside. Carpenter ants also like moist wood for access, so repair those leaks. As with termites, keep wood, earth and debris away from siding. Also, make sure tree branches have no contact with your house: Carpenter ants are capable of invading from on high.

Smaller ants, sometimes called sugar ants, don't tunnel through your wood. However, it is embarrassing to be wiping them off the table when you have dinner guests. These ants like to eat sweets and grease (don't we all) and the trick to keeping them at bay is to keep your kitchen spotless. Keep food sealed in containers, wipe counters frequently, and empty the garbage religiously. "Ants love to infest cat and dog food dishes, even water dishes," says Bauman. Clean like mad, and cut off the ants' food supply.

Roaches

There's good news and bad news about roaches. The good news is they used to be the most common and difficult-to-control pest, according to Cindy Mannes, Director of Public Affairs for the National Pest Management Association. Thanks to better sanitation practices by homeowners, they've moved to the number-three spot. The bad news: Roaches are active at night, so if you see roaches in your kitchen during the daylight hours, you may have a really bad infestation.

Roaches don't do structural damage to homes, but they do spread germs. "Cockroach allergens have also been linked to triggering children's asthma," says Mannes.

Cockroach prevention includes sealing all holes and cracks that provide access to your home from the outside. Make sure to do this in the basement as well as the crawlspace. Keeping food sources scarce will help, though it's a tough task because this bug dines on everything from garbage to wallpaper paste.

Bees/hornets/wasps

These stinging insects range from docile pollinators to nasty beasts that can put you in the hospital if the circumstances are right. Believe it or not, there are bees that can tunnel into your home as well.

Carpenter bees look like big bumblebees, but their abdomens are bare and black. They nest in spring and prefer bare, unfinished wood. The male, who doesn't have a stinger, will hover near the spot where the female is drilling her nest. If there's a big black bee guarding an area of your home, get closer and look for a finger-diameter hole with sawdust beneath it. Don't poke your finger in there, though—females do sting.

Since these bees prefer unfinished wood, the best prevention is a coat of paint. Also, be careful to not let these critters into garages or sheds where they could have access to bare-wood rafter beams, shelves and so forth.

Of course, these bugs of summer are just a drop in the pest bucket. Migrating swallows can invade via a chimney. Ladybugs can completely cover a sunny south wall when the weather warms. But every critter on this list, with the exception of the cockroach, can do significant structural damage to your home. So pay attention to prevention, look for the signs, and don't be afraid to call a professional if it looks like you've got uninvited summer guests.

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