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Termites, Mold, and Moisture: A Bad Trio!

By Karen Mayne

Despite all the good things about living in Hampton Roads, we live in an area of the country that has high levels of termites and mold. Blame that on the relatively warm year round temperatures, high humidity and rainfall.

In nature, termites serve a vital function as decomposers that break down fallen trees and limbs and return wood to the soil. But the wood in our homes, and especially wood that is moist, can be easy pickings for termites. Subterranean termites cause the most structural damage in our area. They live in underground colonies and enter structural wood via mud shelter tubes that they build to keep moist. Termites will even tunnel through insulation to find wood. They feed constantly, but their presence is seldom noticed until damage is severe or the termites swarm inside a building.

Mold and mildew are generic terms used to describe a variety of species of fungus that eat organic materials (wood, paper, fabric, leather, paint, etc.). These fungi can grow quickly in areas that have been submerged during floods. Mold and mildew can also grow in houses, crawl spaces and attics where there are water leaks or high humidity. For people who are highly allergic to mold spores, the presence of mold can be life threatening.

Luckily, there are things homeowners can do to prevent both termites and mold. Not all preventative measures are cheap, but good home maintenance is cheaper than the alternative. replacing structural wood and drywall is expensive.

Here's how to keep those termites, mold and moisture away:

- Make sure the ground around the foundation slopes away from buildings so that rain water drains away.

- Repair leaks in roofs, plumbing and gutters. Fill and caulk cracks and holes that lead into or under the house, including utility lines and plumbing.

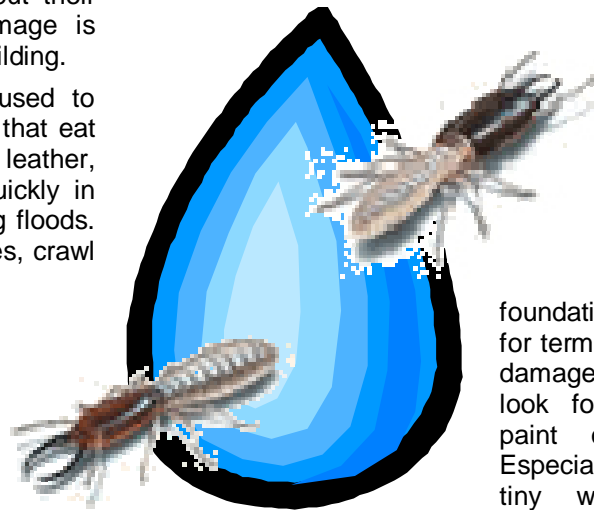
- Clean out gutters and downspouts at least once a year to prevent water from getting into roof soffits and attics. Downspouts should not empty close to the foundation. or add rain barrels to make use of that water.

- Maintain wood siding and trim in good repair. replacing worn caulk and keeping wood painted will help repel both termites and mold.

- Do not store wood close to the house and remove any wood or other organic materials from crawl spaces. Firewood should be stored on a raised platform well away from the house.

Keep mulch, trees and shrubs away from the foundation. An open area of several feet between the house and plantings will allow good air circulation and make inspections easier. Do not allow sprinklers or drip irrigation systems to soak exterior walls or foundations.

When building new structures (fences, sheds, porches, etc.), there should be no wood-to-ground contact. All wood posts (even pressure treated) should be embedded in concrete or set in galvanized post holders. New buildings should have the required termite barriers.



Inspect your house once or twice a year (and after bad storms) for signs of termites, leaks and mold. Use binoculars to look at the roof to make sure shingles are in place, then go into the attic to look for signs of leaks or mold. Check around the foundation and in the crawl space for termite mud tubes, wet areas, or damaged wood. Inside the house, look for spongy floors, bubbling paint or drywall, or sawdust. Especially in spring, look for piles of tiny wings, particularly around windows. a sign of termite swarms.

Mold and mildew show up as black, brown, green, yellow or red areas on wood, walls, and fabric and should be promptly removed.

If inspections under your house are more than you can handle, or if you see signs of termites, then a call to a professional pest control company is warranted. Pest control companies will check for moisture problems while under your house. There are hundreds of pest control companies in our area. To make sure you use one that is reputable, check with the Better Business Bureau. The Tidewater Pest Control Association (www.tpca.com) is an association of local pest control companies whose members promote ethical and environmentally responsible business and pest management practices. Their website includes a list of member companies and phone numbers.

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