

# Drywood termites are a fact of life in the Keys

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Termites are a fact of life for most of us in the Keys. It is rare to find a wooden house that does not have some termite damage. Of the three kinds of termites found in Florida – drywood, dampwood and subterranean – drywood termites are the most common.

Subterranean termites were recently discovered in Key West. They live underground and build mud tubes on interior and exterior walls.

Dampwood termites nest in moist or damp wood caused by leaking water.

Drywood termites spend almost their entire life cycle inside the sound, dry wood members upon which they feed. They do not require contact with soil moisture to survive. Only during brief swarming flights do young adults leave the confines of their galleries to begin new colonies elsewhere. They are social insects that live in colonies with kings, queens and soldiers. In general, they are light to dark brown and one-third to 1 inch long. They differ from ants by having thick waistlines and two pairs of wings the same size.

Peak swarming season is from January to June. The termites fly between dusk and dawn and are attracted to light. They quickly shed their wings and segregate into male/female pairs. You may see the discarded wings on windowsills and near doors. The pairs then examine the wood surfaces for points of entry such as cracks or nail holes, where they can move in together and reproduce. To tell if you have drywood termites, look for frass or excrement. The pellets resemble sand, come in different shades of brown depending on the type of wood being consumed, and can be piled up or spread out if falling from a height.

A sign of advanced infestation is wood with a blistered appearance from tunneling very close to the surface.

If you suspect termites, you may want to have a pest control operator inspect the premises.

To provide a valid report, the inspector must hold a state-issued wood-destroying organism inspection card and be personally licensed in the termite category or be supervised by such a licensee.

All windows, doors, vents and soffits should be screened or caulked. Paint exposed wood surfaces. Before painting, fill cracks and holes with putty. Use pressure-treated wood. Wood can be treated with surface chemicals during home construction.

A broad array of treatment for drywood termites exists, although your local termite extermination companies may not practice more than the most common method, whole-house fumigation. Other methods involve heating, cooling, electrocution and borate surface spraying. Most of these methods are impractical or difficult to accomplish for our area.

Fumigation (tenting) involves covering the entire structure with a gas-tight tarp and releasing a gas inside the tarp, usually sulfuryl fluoride (Vikane), and aerating the fumigant after a set exposure time. Before tenting, the homeowner must remove all plants and animals from the house, remove or place food inside special protective bags, and ensure that there is sufficient tarp clearance between sensitive landscaping and exterior walls. Only after the house has been aerated and tested for absence of fumigant can it be reoccupied. Because the fumigant is a true gas and works as a component of air, no cleanup of clothing, dishes, floors or other surfaces is needed. Tenting provides no residual protection and reinfestation is likely. It is virtually impossible to avoid termites in the Keys. Watch for signs of them and have your pest control operator deal with them. That's the best you can do.

To receive termite publications by mail, send a self addressed, stamped envelope to University of Florida/Monroe County Extension Service, 1100 Simonton St., Key West, FL 33040.

Our phone is 292-4501.