

Danny L. Cain
Walker County Extension Coordinator
1501 North Airport Road
Jasper AL 35504
(205)221-3392

For Publication in *The Daily Mountain Eagle*

I usually get a few questions each year regarding the potential for mulches used around our house and landscapes to introduce or to draw in unwelcome visitors such as termites. This year has to set the record, however. I think the major reason for this is the widely circulated story going around on the internet about a particularly destructive insect called Formosan termite being sold through chain home and garden stores in bags or piles of cheap mulch from hurricane damaged areas of Louisiana and Mississippi.

Let's first take a look at some actual facts about the situation. Recent hurricane activity from Katrina and Rita and others have brought much devastation and destruction to the Southern Gulf Coast areas. With all this destruction there is naturally a lot of plant material (trees, limbs, and in some cases entire tree plantings) that is damaged or downed.

While there are several species of termites, by far the most destructive is indeed the Formosan termite. Many of the hurricane affected areas such as parts of Louisiana, Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, and others do have established colonies of Formosan termites. So it makes sense that mulches from plant materials from these locations (especially Louisiana) would be of concern. That is the jest, so to speak, of the internet story. Here are some facts that will help to put this mostly unfounded story to rest.....the part to the story that you do not get from most internet sources.

In response to this potential threat, the state of Louisiana has imposed a very aggressive strategy to help prevent the spread of Formosan termites to non-infected areas. This strategy implemented by the Louisiana Department of Agriculture and Forestry (LDAF) was actually in placed in effect last October, long before the internet articles began to circulate. A strict quarantine on the movement of wood products such as mulch from Formosan infected areas is prohibited unless the material is either fumigated or treated for Formosan termites and is approved for shipping or else written authorization for shipping untreated material is granted from the LDAF. Even temporary housing such as trailers cannot be moved from the infected Louisiana parishes until cleared by the LDAF. This means that the movement of such wood products from the Formosan infected parishes of

Louisiana without being treated and cleared or without a written grant from the LDAF is not only a bad practice but is also illegal.

Termites can indeed “hitch hike” in organic mulches for long distances, but only if they are already infested with termites or are made of termite infested trees or debris that are **not treated**. The most common way that this happens is when mulches are stored in moist areas in contact with the soil where termites live. There have been no documented cases of movement of Formosan termites in mulches sold through retail chains to date.

Now that we have laid our fears of using mulches around our landscape to rest, there are a couple rules of thumbs for their use that I advise all homeowners. First of all, never use organic or wood product mulch in actual contact with your house, foundation, storage buildings, etc. We use mulches to help hold soil moisture, so the added moisture and the fact that termites do eat wood materials puts you at risk if the mulches contact any wood in the foundation of your home. Leave a bare ground barrier between your mulched beds and your home’s foundation. You can also select a non-wood product for mulching if needed in areas in very close proximity to your home.

It is always this time of year as the temperature starts to warm up when I also get a lot of calls about “swarming” insects in or around houses or storage buildings. The automatic assumption is that they are termites. In most cases they can be either termite or winged ant “alates”. Alates are the adult reproductives that swarm to form new colonies. Both ant and termite alates have wings.

In order to tell them apart you have to look closely, but it is not that difficult. Ant alates have crooked or “elbowed” antennae. Picture in your mind a football goal post. Termite antennae are straight.

The easiest way (at least to me anyway) is the fact that ants have a narrow or pinched waist similar to a wasp. Termites have a broad, non-pinched, waist.

Ants have two sets of wings that are different lengths and generally are only about as long as their body or slightly longer. Termites also have two sets of wings, but they are equal in length and can be up to twice as long as their bodies.

If you notice swarms of these winged insects and determine that they are indeed termites, your best option is to immediately get in touch with a reputable professional pest control operator. As homeowners we simply are not able to adequately protect our homes from damage resulting from termite invasion. There are actually a lot of products available that will kill termites

if you spray it on them but there is a big big difference between killing a few exposed termites and actually protecting your home.