

# HOT NEWS

## FINDING WINGED TERMITES IS A RED FLAG

*Timothy J. Gibb, Extension Entomologist*

Finding winged termites in a home or other building is a near certain sign that the structure is infested. Normally termites stay hidden, either underground, inside wood or in mud tubes in order to maintain the humidity that they need to survive. It is only when the winged reproductive forms are produced that they become plainly visible, and this only happens sporadically.

Winged termites are about 1/4 to 3/8 inch in length and vary from black to yellow-brown in body color. They have 4 equal sized smoke-gray to brown wings that extend past the length of their body. Winged termites are also known as “swarmers” because they come out in large numbers all at one time – usually during the springtime, and after rain events.

Many people confuse winged termites with winged ants. It is very important to know the difference between swarmer ants and termites. Winged termites have straight, bead-like antennae, a thick waist, and a pair of long, equal-length wings. Winged ants have distinctively elbowed antennae, constricted waists, forewings that are larger than the rear wings (unequal size).

inside a home should be a warning of a termite infestation. Ants can be a nuisance, but termites can be down right destructive. They must be controlled in order to save the home.

It is beneficial to understand what swarmer termites are and how they occur. A termite colony begins with a male (king) and a female (queen) termite that mate for life. This can extend to more than 20 years. The queen can produce up to 100 million eggs during her lifetime. Most of these eggs become the workers and soldiers that feed, forage and take care of the colony needs but as the colony matures, some eggs may become reproductives, or winged termites.



Alate termite

Swarmer termites also keep their wings attached only for a short period of time. After a short period of time the wings break at their base and are discarded, sometimes in large piles. The presence of winged termites, or their shed wings,



Termites swarming around the base of a tree.

As the reproductive termite nymph matures, its body lengthens and sexual organs develop. The body turns black, eyes become functional, and wings extend to twice its body length. Reproductives have only one assignment in a colony and that is to leave, find a mate and reproduce.

After emerging from a wood pile or a stump in the woods, reproductive termites fly off to find and mate with reproductives from other colonies. Only a very small percentage of swarming termites actually survive to initiate new colonies. Many are eaten by other insects, amphibians or birds. Swarms emerg-

ing inside a structure cannot escape and therefore usually do not survive. However, do not ignore them. Their presence is a one time per year, red flag that should warn a homeowner that the premises are infested and that a professional pest manager should be called in.