

FIX IT UP!

Bruce Turner

Termite Trauma

A friend of mine who regularly drives I-280 really likes one particularly magnificent house in the Los Altos hills above the freeway, and always checks it out as he goes by. Not long ago he looked up to find the multimillion-dollar home completely shrouded by one of those infamous blue-and-white termite tents.

“Geez,” he chuckled to me later, “I guess termites happen to everybody, don’t they?”

He’s right, of course. Whether you own a mansion or a shack, the wood in your home is a potential meal for a termite. And almost every house sooner or later winds up getting chewed on.

There are basically three kinds of termites eating American homes, and the Bay Area is one of the few areas of the country where you can see all three. Subterranean termites are by far the most common, but we also get drywood and dampwood termites. They all like wood and moisture, and we have enough of both.

Unless you’re selling your house and having it inspected as a part of the sales process, the first indication of a termite infestation may turn up while you’re doing some work around the house or up on the roof. You may actually see the termites flying or crawling around, or you may see small, unexplained piles of what looks like wood dust that keep reappearing in the same place. (They’re actually termite droppings.)

That’s the time to get a professional termite inspection. Spend the money – only a pro can accurately tell you what you’ve got and how much of it, and that’s worth its weight in gold. But if you get the bad news, please don’t panic. Termites eat slowly – your house isn’t going to collapse tomorrow, and you’re not going to fall through the floor like a Saturday morning cartoon character. Take your time, explore your options and get some estimates.

If the infestation is isolated in one spot, you won’t need that telltale tent – exterminators have multiple tools, from sprays to eco-friendly bait, that can wipe out the little munchers. Make sure the exterminator shows you all the termite damage he finds. Repairing that damage is often nothing more than simple carpentry – cut out the damaged wood and replace it – and if you’re a do-it-yourself type, go for it.

(If your house does need tenting, get good references and make sure the exterminator’s crew is light on their feet. Your roof can be damaged by somebody tromping around when they’re setting up the tenting.)

So how do you keep termites from coming back? Actually, you don’t. Termites can be eradicated on Tuesday and completely re-colonized by the weekend. (I’ve seen them swarming like bees – it’s a pretty amazing sight.) But what you can do is make things tougher for them. Make sure your house is sealed from moisture intrusion, because moisture begets dry rot and the rot attracts the termites. And be sure no wooden part of your home makes contact with the ground – to a subterranean termite, that’s a freeway to a free lunch.