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PROPERTY INSPECTIONS

TERMITES: THE GUESTS YOU DON'T WANT OVER FOR DINNER

You know the types. The guests who arrive unexpectedly and unannounced, and you don't want them to stay. What's more, they eat you out of house and home.

Termites are those kinds of guests – but they *literally* eat your house and home. The voracious nature of their appetite, and the insidious way they sneak into a property marks them as Enemy No.1 for the Australian houseowner.

By 2010 figures, about one in three homes in Australia have a termite or invasive pest problem. That's a seriously large number! The problem has forced the introduction of new building regulations and cornered Councils into declaring areas of infestation within their municipalities.

Of the 80 municipalities in Victoria, 60 (i.e. 75%) are currently designated partial or full termite areas – though one might ponder on where the line is drawn between municipalities. What, for instance, would stop a termite from simply crossing the road to have dinner in a non-designated area? At the same time too, while we continue to open up new tracts of land across the state, there is the potential to increase the level of infestation even further.

'Termite management' is the term now coined to handle the situation on a day-to-day level. Houseowners and builders are provided with a wealth of information by authorities on what to look out for, what to do about prevention, and what remedial action can be taken. In other words, they are your guests and you need to deal with them!

So what to do? As with most problems, being informed is the best place to start. Know thine enemy! And there are lots of ways you can make life difficult for termite invaders. This article is designed to give you an overview of some of the basic information. There is a vast amount of material available in the public domain and at the end of this paper, we've listed some key organisations you can contact.

What do Termites do?

Subterranean termites are also commonly known as white ants because of their light colour but their habits and lifestyle are distinctly different from ants. Some 350 species of termite exist in Australia but only about 30 of these cause significant damage.

Termites are social insects and have a caste system that includes workers, soldiers and reproductives. The reproductives are essentially the scouts and in the warmer, humid months, they fly in swarms to source new locations for colonies – which may, unfortunately, be your house! Once the nest is established, the Queen can produce up to 2000 eggs per day.

The workers are the destroyers, responsible for sourcing food and building the nest. They feed on wood, such as rotted tree stumps

and wood off-cuts, and other cellulose materials - even electrical cabling and some plastics. They like to avoid light and maintain a warm temperature and humidity, so they build underground galleries, or mud-like tubes. Their surreptitious network of galleries can extend for a hundred metres from the nest, in search of food. This method of concealment is why they are so hard to detect, even for pest experts.

Added to that, termite behaviour patterns are not predictable and their galleries have been known to travel up walls, into roofs, even up high-rise constructions. And while concrete slabs of homes might seem a likely barrier, all it can take is a crack in the slab, timber in contact with the ground or a pipe penetration to allow direct and undetected entry by these hungry homewreckers. They are also partial to water, so leaking drains and pipes can be very appealing.

Once in contact with timber, termites will destroy from the inside, leaving only a wafer-thin layer between themselves and the outside environment. Discovery can be when an unsuspecting vacuum cleaner head crashes against a hollowed-out skirting board, or a chair leg falls through a floor!

So How Do You Stop These Unwanted Guests From Turning Up?

The first step should be a pest inspection by a professional. This will help to determine if there is any infestation present, and if so, the extent of it and what remedial action needs to be taken. A professional inspector will also help you to understand what preventative methods are available and what basic maintenance you can do around the home to stop termites from gaining access.

The best protection your home can have is a barrier system, under or around the house. Termite barriers can be physical or chemical and are designed to either stop the termites in their tracks or bring them out into the open so they can be spotted easily. Approved methods of preventative termite





control are covered by Australian Standard AS 3660.1 (2000). This Standard does however state that an approved termite barrier system cannot categorically prevent termite attack because it is possible for the barrier to be breached by termites. It recommends therefore that you maintain regular inspections, to watch for possible termite activity and to make sure the barrier is preserved.

For all new buildings, including alterations and extensions, which are built within designated termite-infested areas, the Building Regulations now require some form of management against termite attack. The Building Code of Australia offers two alternative strategies: the use of termite resistant materials for the primary structural elements (as in concrete slabs and steel frames), or the installation of a chemical or physical barrier system.

Physical Barriers

These are usually installed in new constructions but some can be retrofitted to existing houses. They are made from metal, crushed rock or other materials that are too dense and hard for termites chew through. Barriers can be laid under concrete slabs, foundations and within cavity walls. Ant caps can also be installed at the top of stumps or underfloor piers to force termites into the open where they are easier to detect during regular inspections.

Chemical Barriers

Chemicals are usually insecticides and can be placed under concrete slabs, foundations and around houses, both in new and existing structures. There are two types of chemical barriers – in-soil and in-plastics. In-soil barriers are formed where the chemical is applied to the soil under or around the foundations of a building. In-plastic barriers are plastic sheets containing a chemical which are typically installed like physical barriers. Please note that chemical barriers can only be installed by licensed pest controllers.

Good Maintenance

There are a number of smart ways you, as a house owner or resident, can discourage termites, mainly through limiting the potential food supply:

- Keep loose timber, old stumps, garden logs/sleepers away from buildings – pick up all those timber off-cuts that are lying under the house.
- Make sure you have no leaking water pipes, drains, showers or sinks, and capture water from air conditioning units.
- Keep the area under your house well ventilated, so there is a lot of air movement under suspended floors – avoid a humid atmosphere that will attract termites.
- Check to see that your concrete slab is properly designed, compacted and cured.
- Use treated or naturally resistant timber when it is in contact or close to soil.
- Arrange for regular inspections by a professional inspector of the outside environs of your house as well as the interior – ideally on an annual basis. Termite activity is particularly high in early spring to late summer.
- Garden mulch is attractive food for termites. If you have a garden around the base of your house, make sure you keep mulch clear of the 'weepholes'. Weepholes are located in the first or second course of bricks on a concrete slab house, where the mortar has been left out in every second or third brick.

What if the Unwanted Guests have already arrived?

It is reassuring to know that you can get rid of termites. But it is important that you do take immediate steps to eradicate them so the damage doesn't spread – on your property or on that of your neighbours.

Having said that, if you should uncover termites, it is best to put things back as you found them until you can get an expert to effectively treat the nest. Otherwise, you may find you can kill a few termites initially but the rest of the colony will re-group and set off to attack another part of the house.

Remedial termite control is covered by Australian Standard AS 3660.2 (2000) and usually involves chemicals applied as dusts, baits, barrier treatments or reticulation systems.

Dusts

Dusts can be applied as stand-alone treatments or as part of an integrated approach, but they can only be used by licensed professional pest controllers. The dust is applied to active termite workings (i.e. an infestation site), the idea being that the dust sticks to the soft termite bodies inside. Termites will carry this dust back to the nest, and as they groom themselves, they will pass the toxic dust through the nest. A nest will quickly die off as a result.

Baits

Baiting systems attract termites into a baiting station and then feed the termites a food that contains an active toxic ingredient. The termites will collect the bait and take it back to their nest, again spreading it through the colony. If enough is ingested, the nest can be eliminated. As with dusts, baiting systems must be applied by a professional pest controller.

Barrier Treatments

A remedial soil barrier can be applied under and/or around the house in the same way as a preventative chemical soil barrier.

Reticulation Systems

Purpose-built reticulated pipe systems have been developed in Australia. These systems apply an insecticide around the home and can be periodically replenished.

Managing the Guest List

From a houseowner's perspective, there isn't anything nice to say about termites. They are horrid creatures, with expensive taste. You should take every precaution you can to keep them at bay.

Before you buy a house, we strongly recommend you arrange a building and pest inspection. You don't want to run the risk of having your expensive investment eaten away, so it makes sense to pay a small inspection fee by comparison for that peace of mind.

There are useful agencies that can help you with general information on termite management and a large number of pest control specialists in the marketplace. If you are unsure of how to proceed, call SPI Property Inspections on 1300 721 032 and we would be happy to help you.

REFERENCES/RESOURCES

Building Commission:
www.buildingcommission.com.au

Australian Standards:
www.standards.org.au

CSIRO: www.csiro.au

Termite Action Victoria:
info@termiteactionvictoria.com.au