



Learn to Keep Termites at Bay

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TREB PRESIDENT'S COLUMN AS IT APPEARS IN THE TORONTO SUN

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If you're considering the purchase of your next home, you already know that a number of considerations are involved in the decision making process like schools, transportation and local amenities. Often though, the factors that you can't see are the ones that require the most attention.

For nearly a century, our city's inhabitants have shared this land with eastern subterranean termites. It is believed that they arrived in Toronto in 1938, offloaded from American cargo ships docked near Cherry Street. Since those early days, these industrious little creatures have not only taken up residence in downtown neighbourhoods, they have spread throughout the Greater Toronto Area and Southern Ontario.

Given that their colonies can number in the millions, termites' consumption of wood and other building materials can cause considerable structural damage to a home, which isn't covered by property insurance.

As well, since damage isn't normally noticeable on the surface, it's essential that homebuyers consider arranging for a professional inspection before making an offer. To begin, inquire with pest control companies and neighbours as to whether work has been carried out on the street.

As a homeowner, it's equally important to remain vigilant against these invaders.

Termites are similar in appearance to ants, measuring approximately the length of a grain of rice however; they are creamy white in colour. You aren't likely to spot one though, as they need the damp environs of mud tunnels, wood and soil in order to survive. Their low profile and tendency to work 24 hours a day, year-round has helped them thrive since the Jurassic era. Situating their colonies underground, they can enter your home by tunneling into wood or constructing shelter tubes to carry them through paper-thin cracks in your foundation.

"It's a common misconception that only homes with wood exteriors get termites," said Richard Murphy Sr. of Toronto's Aetna Pest Control. "They can easily gain access through rubble foundation walls, concrete blocks, bricks – virtually anywhere there is a crack."

It's important therefore, to be able to identify the shelter tubes they use to travel. They look like thin streaks of clumped mud and can extend several metres. If you spot a shelter tube, don't waste any time enlisting professional help.

If your foundation and basement beams show no sign of shelter tubes, there are several steps you can take to keep termites at bay, starting with keeping your home's foundation free of any cracks. Also ensure that exterior grading provides for water to flow away from your home, being especially cautious about downspouts that can saturate the ground nearby. This point is key because most live in the top eight inches of soil from April to December. Their queen meanwhile, can exist 30 feet underground and has a lifespan of 20 years. Firewood and other wood products should always be kept away from your home's foundation, and foliage should be trimmed away from the structure as well. Finally, don't use plants, soil or mulch from other people's gardens as you may be transporting these insects and don't move plants from your old home to your new.

While it's important to be cautious, there's no need for the threat of termites to cause you sleepless nights. Just like regular visits to your dentist, with proper care, your home could still be standing for centuries to come.

Richard Silver is President of the Toronto Real Estate Board, a professional association that represents 31,000 REALTORS® in the Greater Toronto Area.

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