

TERMITE TREATMENTS: HOW TO AVOID AN UNPLEASANT EXPERIENCE

By Michael Rudolph
President
Bosch Pest Control, Inc.

Reprinted from the Muscatine Journal

Some months ago, a local news station did a report on termite treatments. The consumer interviewed was frustrated by the lack of results of the termite treatment she had purchased. To those in the industry it was apparent that the reporter was likewise frustrated in her attempt to uncover clear and helpful answers. The conclusion of the report was to get two or three quotes from companies that were licensed, certified, insured and members of trade associations. These are standard answers, but not helpful answers.

All termite treatment companies are required by law to be licensed, certified and insured. Most companies are also members of a trade association, but the only requirement here is to pay your dues. There are no standards that must be met. Getting two or three quotes is a good idea, but it often leaves the consumer more confused than informed.

I wish that I could say that I was proud of the termite industry, but over the years I have observed a variety of questionable practices—some fraudulent, some unethical and some just misinformed or unwise. In this article I hope to offer the consumer guidelines for avoiding an unpleasant termite treatment experience.

FIRST, BE SURE YOU'RE DEALING WITH TERMITES. Some years ago, I was called to the house of an elderly lady to give a second opinion. The pest control technician who serviced her house on a monthly basis had informed her that she had termites and that he would treat it the following afternoon for \$500. Was this a good deal? Being in poor health, she herself had not even been in her basement for a few years. What I found was swarming ants, not termites. No treatment was necessary.

The two easiest ways to tell the difference between ants and termites is by looking at the body and the antenna of the insect. Ants have a narrow waist and look like beads on a string. Termites have a broad waist. Ants have what could be described as an elbow or joint in their antenna. Termites have straight antenna. If you still have questions, you can call us to identify the insect or contact the Iowa State Extension Office for help.

SECOND, KNOW THE HISTORY OF YOUR HOUSE. When a house is treated in the conventional way for termites, holes are drilled in the foundation, the floor of the basement and through any concrete that borders the outside of the foundation. A termiticide barrier is applied to surround and protect the structure. These holes are then patched or plugged and are usually visible.

From time to time, termite treatment salesmen go door to door informing people that there are termites in the neighborhood and offering to do a free termite inspection. If they find termite damage, they give the homeowner a quote and pressure them to treat their house. If the house has already been treated, there is no reason to retreat the house unless live termites are found or there is reason to believe the termiticide barrier has been broken. There have been times when I was called to give a second opinion and found that the homeowner was being pressured to treat his house when it had already been treated and did not need to be retreated. This is easy money for an unscrupulous inspector and probably a waste of money for the homeowner.

THIRD, KNOW WHAT YOU'RE GETTING FOR YOUR MONEY. As with many purchases you make, the lowest bid is often the worst bid to accept. A common practice in the termite industry to get business, is to offer a low bid below the cost of a legitimate treatment. A company can still make a profit doing this by doing an incomplete treatment. A warranty may be offered, for an additional cost, which will pay for any further treatments that may be necessary. The average home should take two men a full day to a day and a half of

work and should require two hundred to three hundred gallons of termiticide. If you thought you were paying for a complete treatment but the service technician completes the job in a few hours with less than one hundred gallons of termiticide you probably did not get a complete treatment. The legality of this practice is being questioned and prosecuted in several states.

FINALLY, IT IS IMPORTANT TO KNOW THE TERMITICIDE AND TREATMENT METHOD BEING USED. Before 1988, this was not a problem. Most homes were treated in the conventional way with Chlordane, a termiticide that lasted as much as forty years in the soil. Retreatments were rarely necessary. At the end of 1987 however, EPA canceled the registration for this product. Suddenly, the termite industry was thrown into confusion. Manufacturers paraded a series of termiticides before the industry with the claim that a highly repellent termiticide was the best option to choose. For some years it was the only option available. Unfortunately, neither the termite control industry or the homeowner found these termiticides satisfactory. By the mid to late 1990s the industry was searching desperately for a better alternative.

Termite baits were the first alternative to be offered. Typically 20 to 25 stations, or blocks of wood, were placed in the ground and monitored over a period of time. When the termites found the blocks of wood, they were replaced with termite bait. The worker termites feed on this bait and take it back to the nest to feed the nest. In time, control or possibly elimination, of the nest is achieved. This method has the advantage of far less termiticide placed in the environment, but the disadvantage of the time required to achieve control and a cost that is usually higher than conventional treatments. Furthermore, not all termite baits are equally effective.

The second alternative to finally reach the market were non-repellent termiticides. Tests conducted by the USDA have shown some of these termiticides to be very promising although their longevity in the ground is yet to be proven. These new non-repellent termiticides work both on contact, but also like the termite baits. Since the active ingredient is slow acting, the termite has time to return to the nest and pass on a toxic dose to others in the nest. With these non-repellent termiticides and a conventional method of treatment the odds of termites contacting the termiticide is far greater than with a baiting system. This results in faster protection of the property and a reduction of the termite population in the area.

The choice between conventional termiticides and termite baits is a choice informed consumers must make depending on their own unique situation and desires. It should be clarified, however, that if the consumer chooses a conventional treatment, repellent termiticides, which some companies still use, can cost as little as half the price of non-repellent termiticides. This is a savings that often costs the consumer more in the long run.

IN CONCLUSION, the familiar phrase, "Let the Buyer Beware," is the best advice to follow. The best way to do this is "Let the Buyer be Informed." The following are sources on the internet that can assist the consumer in making an informed decision:

www.termidorhome.com

www.termidoronline.com

www.ipm.iastate.edu/ipm/iin/termites

www.pctonline.com

www.entm.purdue.edu/entomology/ext/index.htm