



Bug-Wise

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Landscape Mulch and Formosan Termites: As spring approaches and gardening activities increase, media coverage of the potential for Formosan termites to be transported in wood mulch has also intensified. Although this is a valid concern, the potential for termites to be transported in solid wood products is much greater. Formosan termites first entered Mississippi, and spread through the southern portion of the state, through infested railroad cross ties used as landscape timbers. They can also be spread through the transport of wood or bark mulch, especially if that mulch has been stacked or piled on the ground for some time in a site infested with Formosan termites.

Gardeners in non-infested areas of the state need to be sure they know the point of origin of any mulch they buy. Avoid mulch that comes from an area known to be infested with Formosan termites (unless it has been properly fumigated and/or certified to be termite free). This includes 28 parishes in South Louisiana and 25 counties in South Mississippi, as well as several counties in South Alabama. Additional points of information regarding the issue of mulch and termites are discussed below.

What Type Of 'Mulch' Is A Concern?: Wood mulch resulting from chipping downed trees and other wood debris in counties infested with Formosan termites is the type of 'mulch' that is of greatest concern. If this mulch has been stored in direct contact with the soil, either in bulk or in bags, in an infested area before being shipped the concern is even greater. This is not the typical bark mulch that most gardeners normally use. Most bark mulch is a by-product of commercial timber harvest and processing. Bark mulch that originates from non-infested areas is not of concern.

Solid Wood Products Present The Greatest Risk: Although there is some potential for Formosan termites to hitch a ride in wood mulch, solid wood products present a much greater risk. Wood products such as used cross ties, used utility poles, firewood, logs, or salvaged lumber, that originate from areas infested with Formosan termites can easily harbor this pest.

A Quarantine Is Already in Place: The Mississippi Department of Agriculture already has a regulation that prohibits transport of firewood, railroad cross ties, utility poles, and other cellulose material (like wood/bark mulch) that has been in contact with the soil, from a quarantined area. The quarantined area includes 28 parishes in South Louisiana and 25 Counties in South Mississippi. Mississippi counties known to already be infested with Formosan termites are: Madison, Hinds, Rankin, Lauderdale, Smith, Jasper, Covington, Jones, Lincoln, Adams, Wilkinson, Amite, Pike, Walthall, Marion, Lamar, Forrest, Perry, Greene, Pearl River, Stone, George, Hancock, Harrison, and Jackson.

The Quarantine May Not Stop All Movement: Even with this quarantine, there is still the potential for infested material to be shipped out of quarantined areas. This is why gardeners, as well as retail and wholesale distributors and landscape contractors, need to know the source of all mulch and cross ties they buy.

What If I Live In A Quarantined County?: This depends on which county. Some counties, like those in the Coastal area, are so widely infested with Formosan termites that it may not matter that much. More northern counties, like Hinds, Madison, and Smith have only isolated infestations. Formosan termites probably will continue to spread, but why help speed up the process? If you have no good reason to believe that Formosan termites are already present in your immediate area, then you have a good reason to avoid using mulch, cross ties, etc that come from an infested area.

Won't The Process of Chipping The Wood Into Mulch Kill The Termites? It will kill most of them, but there is always the possibility for some reproductive termites to survive. More important is the potential for Formosan termites to infest mulch after it has been chipped. Mulch that is stored in direct contact with the soil in a Formosan infested site can be infested. Termites will invade bagged mulch, as well as bulk mulch, and it is possible for them to be transported in either type of mulch.

Using Mulch Increases The Potential For Termites: Formosan termites are only established in 25 Mississippi counties, but eastern subterranean termites are present in all 82 counties. Termites feed on cellulose and wood mulch is cellulose. Any time we place 'termite food' around our house, we make it more favorable for termites. This does not mean that you need to avoid all use of mulch, but you do need to take some common sense precautions.

Proper Use of Mulch: Avoid placing wood mulch, or pine straw, immediately adjacent to your house. The worse thing you can do is apply mulch so deep that it comes in contact with wood, siding, or other cellulose structural components. Even if the house has been treated for termites, this creates a bridge over the treated soil and gives termites direct access to the home. The best approach is to maintain a mulch-free band of at least three to four feet wide around the foundation. Where appropriate, stones, gravel or other inorganic materials can be used to 'mulch' this band. Some types of mulch are more favorable to termites than others. Cedar is initially somewhat repellent to termites, but this effect declines as the mulch weathers and composts.

Are Formosan Termites Really That Much Worse Than The Termites We Already Have? Formosan termites have much larger colonies and eat more wood per individual termite than our native eastern subterranean termites. This means that they can do more damage more quickly than eastern subterranean termites. In addition, Formosan termites produce a 'carton material' that makes it possible for them to maintain colonies above ground, without having to maintain direct contact with the soil. This can make them more difficult to control in some cases. Still, Formosan termites are susceptible to the same termiticides used to control eastern subterranean termites and experienced pest control professionals have an effective arsenal of products and techniques to control this pest.

Be Sure Your Home Is Treated For Termites: This is a good time to review the termite coverage you have on your home. Do you have an active termite contract in force? When was the last time your home was treated for termites? If your home has been treated, what product was used? Treating your home for termites is not a do it yourself project. You will need to hire a professional pest control company to do the job. This is expensive, but termite protection is something few Mississippi homeowners can afford to be without.

See Extension Publication 531, Subterranean Termite Control, for general information on termites and their control. Bug-Wise Newsletter number 2 of 2005, Termite Swarming Time, provides additional information on termite treatment options.