

TERMITE INFESTED MULCH??

An apparent **hoax** has been circulating about **Formosan termite-infested mulch from New Orleans**. Many people are receiving e-mails like the following:

”Subject: Mulch Warning

If you use mulch around your house be very careful about buying mulch this year. After the Hurricane in New Orleans many trees were blown over. These trees were then turned into mulch and the state is trying to get rid of tons and tons of this mulch to any state or company who will come and haul it away. So it will be showing up in Home Depot and Lowes at dirt cheap prices with one huge problem; Formosan Termites will be the bonus in many of those bags. New Orleans is one of the few areas in the country were the Formosan Termites has gotten a strong hold and most of the trees blown down were already badly infested with those termites.

Now we may have the worst case of transporting a problem to all parts of the country that we have ever had. These termites can eat a house in no time at all and we have no good control against them, so tell your friends that own homes to avoid cheap mulch and know were it came from.”

Following are some initial comments from some “experts” in the field. We will update you in future newsletters if there are any other developments on this issue.

Comments from Barbara Thorne, termite expert at the University of Maryland:

I would not worry too much until some clear examples of this emerge. Only mulch that has sat still for a while will become termite infested. In the case of New Orleans, from what I understand, wood has been chipped and then moved out fairly quickly to make room for more. The higher risk is movement of construction debris and tree stumps, but I just talked to a termite expert from New Orleans last week, and he said they are moving such stuff (mostly) to massive dump sites relatively locally.

In short, lots of scenarios could play out here, and in about 2-3 months I think we'll have a good read on possible progressions, but the termite experts I've talked to so far are not overly worried.

Comments from Michael Merchant, Urban Entomologist Texas Cooperative Extension:

I have just conducted a little research today on the subject of this email in response to some media requests. I spoke with Louisiana termite researcher Dr. Gregg Henderson, Louisiana State University, and he informed me that there is indeed **a quarantine on all wood waste from hurricane devastated areas of southern Louisiana**. The quarantine specifically addresses the concern about

Formosan termite-infested wood products being shipped to new areas. The state is currently debating how or whether large quantities of wood material can be treated prior to shipping to overflow landfills in Mississippi that do not currently have Formosans. However, the bottom line is that Louisiana neither encourages nor condones the sale of wood waste in mulch from the hurricane damaged areas.

If anyone is chipping, bagging and selling mulch from southern LA it is being done under the radar and illegally. The same would be true for Texas where there are also large quantities of wood from Hurricane Rita-affected areas that also have Formosan termites.

Part of the email message circulating around the Internet is accurate at least the part about Formosan termites being found in damaged trees and the POTENTIAL for Formosans to be transported in wood mulch. However, the mulching process is highly destructive to termites and the likelihood is low of transporting a viable mini-colony of Formosans in this manner. Having said that, Formosan termites have been known to be shipped in this manner at least once.

The essence of this email is a hoax, in my opinion. I believe it very unlikely that the large retailers mentioned would be buying and distributing termites from illegal sources. A far greater, and better documented risk is the sale and distribution of recycled railroad ties.

Railroad ties are commonly sold throughout the south for use as landscape timbers. Unfortunately, despite their creosote treatment, Formosan termites can easily inhabit the center (untreated) areas of railroad ties. Texas recently enacted a quarantine for this type of wood coming from Formosan-infested areas; however we are still in the process of developing enforcement protocols and I am unaware of whether inspections and stop-sale orders have yet to be enacted.

Despite the fact that I consider risks of Formosan termite infestations in mulches to be low, I am recommending that consumers be alert to the presence of termites in bagged or bulk mulches. If you open a bag and find it infested with termites you might consider resealing the bag and placing it in a larger black plastic garbage bag and exposing it to the hot sun for several days. Raising mulch temperatures to 120 degrees Fahrenheit for an hour or more is generally sufficient to kill all insect life.

Another way to ensure that you don't introduce unwanted termites into your landscape is to **purchase garden mulch from a reliable, local source.** Many municipalities now produce and sell mulches produced from city yard trimmings and landscape waste. This should be a safe source for mulch and is a great way to close the circle and encourage recycling of a valuable resource that would otherwise end up in a landfill.