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Ants love insulation

Inspect insulation to find carpenter ants

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Author's Note: There are many homes built with exterior insulation finishing systems, while others are built with structural insulated panels. Both types of construction may be a carpenter ant problem for pest management professionals. I have treated a few EIFS homes, but not enough to feel confident in recommending a course of action. Therefore, EIFS issues will not be discussed here.

Several types of insulation and insulation systems are used in the construction of homes in the Northwest. Two types that have been used the most over the last 25 years are fiberglass and rigid foam.

Fiberglass batts and rolls and rigid foam are available with (faced) or without (unfaced) moisture barriers. The moisture barrier, if properly installed, should face the heated area it is insulating.

Both materials are used in ceilings, walls and floors. High moisture in the air can be retained in these materials through condensation when it is cold outside and warm inside, or vice versa. The ability to retain moisture, heat and the softness of these materials make them ideal nesting areas for carpenter ants.

During the past 20 years of trying to locate carpenter ant infestations in homes, nearly every colony I have located has been in one or both of these types of insulation. Colonies can be in walls, ceilings or floors, or all three locations in the same house. Often, inadequate ventilation or improper installation causes moisture to accumulate in or around the insulation. Ants always seem to find these wet spots to infest, and their nests can be as large as the conditions allow.

Vaulted ceilings with no vented ridge or soffit vents are the most common problem areas I've encountered. Finding large nests up to 500 square feet is not uncommon. The same is true of flat insulated attics with rolls or batts in them. A broken bath fan hose or unvented attic creates ideal conditions under the fiberglass. Very large nests can be found in attics, and leaking plumbing vents can be a problem in both types of roofs. Sweating or leaking skylights are another concern.

I find carpenter ant nests in insulated walls around leaking or sweating plumbing, dishwashers, water heaters and older window and door casings. Short eaves that have no gutters can splash water on exterior siding all year long, and I find many problems in the first two feet of exterior walls next to the ground.

Insulated floors can hold huge ant nests. I inspect for carpenter ants above the insulation next to the subfloor under sources of heat such as refrigerators, freezers, water heaters, dishwashers, bathtubs and shower stalls. Sliding exterior doors next to decks seem to leak quite often, which can lead to problems in the floor below.

Carpenter ants move their eggs, larvae and pupae to different areas above the insulation at different times of the year. I find large caches of empty pupal skins above insulation quite often, and no adult ants around them. I have found areas of old infestations under homes with no active adults at all, leading me to believe conditions changed and the ants left for a more desirable location.

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Insulated rim joist areas are another place to inspect, because they seem to sweat even when the house is properly vented and a moisture barrier is on the ground.

The first thing I do when looking in a crawlspace is to make sure the dryer is properly vented. Dryers can pump large amounts of water vapor that can condense everywhere, causing a multitude of problems. The odor of fabric softener in a crawlspace is a dead giveaway that the hose is disconnected or broken.

Take it case by case

Treating for carpenter ants can be easy or difficult, depending on the location of the colony or colonies. It can be as easy as vacuuming the colony or drilling and treating large areas. I have baited with very limited to no success.

Regardless of the infestation, protective gear is important when working in attics and crawlspaces. I wear overalls, hat, face mask, gloves and knee pads. On large areas, I bring lights under the house or wear a headlamp. Two trips may be necessary to reinstall any insulation that was moved during the job.

Damage done to the structure itself can vary greatly. Or, the ants just live in the insulation, never damaging anything. In other cases, they may cut through rafters, joists or studs to enlarge the nest, or even cut "windows" in the subfloors up into the walls. I've had jobs where carpenter ants cut windows in the ceiling of a house to throw out the insulation in small chunks. The insulation drops in piles or lines throughout the home.

I have been to homes where the owners never knew there was an ant problem until they started to tear up old carpets or put on a new roof. That's when they uncover huge nests. Rigid foam can be chewed up and thrown out of a large part of the rafter space.

Carpenter ant control can be accomplished if you know where to look. Puffing a little dust here and there, or just fogging may stop them for a season, but to get lasting results, get to the source of the problem. It will most likely be in the insulation.

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