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Hot & Cold Running Termites

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Sometimes termites are there but hard to find. The tell tale signs are easy enough to find during swarm season but there are those homes where termite evidence is more difficult to find than the termite professional normally encounters. As you might expect, this column is about one of those more difficult situations.

Recently, a pest control company performed a termite control application for a homeowner. The job was performed without any problems and all seemed well upon completion of the work. The homeowner paid for the service performed and was pleased with the work performed and the service rendered. However, some time after the treatment the homeowner observed what he thought were termite mud tubes and possibly a small swarm or workers of which he was not quite sure.

What was most alarming to the homeowner was where he noticed the mud tube as it appeared to be originating from a disturbing location. To the homeowner it looked as though the termites were coming from his bathtub faucet. This was of great concern to the homeowner because, in his mind, it triggered a sequence of, what was later to be determined, erroneous conclusions.

The homeowner thought to himself, if termites were able to create mud tunnels which emerge from the faucet then they must be have been able to have entered into the plumbing pipes somewhere and, if the termites are in the pipes, the plumbing system must be contaminated with termites. Worse yet, he must have concluded, was that if the termites were killed by the termite product used than the water in his home must be contaminated with the termiticide. Such was the genesis of this case.

After reaching his conclusions the homeowner called the past control company to register his complaints. He was concerned that, because he found a mud tube indicating, in his mind, termite activity taking place after the treatment was performed, and, that because the termites were coming from within his plumbing system the pipes had been penetrated and either the termites themselves carried termiticide into the pipes or his water system must have been contaminated directly during the treatment work.

As any quality company would do, a service manager was sent out to visit with the homeowner and evaluate the situation. He first inspected for termite activity. He found no evidence of termite activity. The mud tube the homeowner observed was in the bath which was not normally used by the homeowner. The inspector concluded this was an old and inactive termite tube with no sign of live termites. The swarm evidence observed was also old and not indicative of current activity.

The facts were explained to the homeowner by the service manager. Although the homeowner was pleased there were no signs of active termites, he was still concerned there may be some degree of water contamination. By now, I'm hoping, nearly all of you have concluded there is no possible way the water system could have been contaminated based upon what you've read about this case thus far. The service manager made the same conclusion and explained this to the homeowner as well. However, it appeared, fear had gotten the best of the homeowner and he was sure there was, at least, some degree of contamination present. The homeowner wanted a water sample taken and analyzed to assure there was no contamination and, possibly, because he was not hearing what he wanted from the service manager he decided to call the termiticide manufacturer to seek assistance and another opinion.

The manufacturer sent a technical representative to visit with the homeowner. He explained to the homeowner that his plumbing supply is a sealed system under pressure and that any penetration to the system would force water to escape, under pressure, and the likelihood of a liquid intrusion of termiticide into such a system was beyond likely, practically impossible. Fortunately for the applicator this representative was very clever. He further explained to the homeowner that if the plumbing system was penetrated either by termites or otherwise during the application the system would be leaking. The homeowner "bought in" on this logical explantation.

To illustrate his point the representative walked the homeowner over to the water meter. He explained the digital meter would be moving if there, in fact, was a leak in the system. The homeowner agreed but questioned, "what if it was only a tiny leak?" The representative granted that it was possible there may be a tiny leak. However, the representative went to a faucet located nearby and ran the water. This allowed the homeowner to see the meter run. The faucet was adjusted to represent a "tiny leak" and, although the meter needed to be watched for a few minutes it did, in fact, move very slowly.

The representative also explained that termites were not able to chew through copper pipes and, generally, were not able to enter a pressurized plumbing system. He further showed the homeowner that what had appeared to be termite shelter tubes emerging from a bath tub faucet were, upon closer inspection, tubes which followed along the outside of the pipes within the hollow of the decorative fixture. This was revealed upon removal of a piece of decorative cover trim. He concluded by stating anything otherwise would mean your home would have, hot and cold running termites!