



TERMITES AND OTHER MULCH CONCERNS

By Joel W. Allen, Extension Educator

There has been much press and lots of emails lately regarding the potential problem in wood mulch coming from the Gulf Coast area containing infestations of Formosan termites, a very serious structural pest. After doing some research of my own into the likelihood of this termite becoming established here, I too discovered, that like so many of the emails you and I receive daily, this one was “much ado about nothing,” although a good heads up for all of us. According to one Cooperative Extension entomologist in Texas, “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.”

Eastern subterranean termites, *Reticulitermes flavipes* (Kollar), are serious pests of the Northeast and many colonies have been found throughout Columbia County. They cause major structural damage to homes and outbuildings. The Formosan subterranean termite, *Coptotermes formosanus*, while also responsible for major structural damage, is a much different critter and, fortunately, is not able to survive our winters. According to several authorities I checked with, while it may be possible for wood mulch to contain these termites, it is unlikely they will survive the trip North and even, if they do, they will not survive the exposure to our colder temperatures in the spring, fall, and winter. That's the good news.

Several recent news reports I have seen indicate that it is also unlikely that the wood that may be infested with the Formosan termite in the south, will ever make it into a wood mulch product, certainly not one made by any reputable mulch company or retailer. In fact, the most recent news item indicated the State of Louisiana has put in place a quarantine on all wood products from the hurricane Katrina-devastated area of Southern Louisiana being shipped to new areas. Again, while the threat of us ever seeing the Formosan termite here in Columbia County is very small, it is still a good heads up.

Speaking of wood mulch, another issue that this concern reminded me of was that of what we have called “toxic” mulch. This comes from wood mulch being stockpiled for awhile outdoors exposed to the elements and the levels of natural chemicals accumulating over time, to a toxic degree, at the bottom of the pile. While the majority of the wood mulch would remain a usable product, the bottom layer could be very toxic to plant material, ultimately killing all plants it comes in contact with either as a mulch or soil amendment.

This is seldom a problem with the mulch one might buy in bags or even from companies that manufacture their own. It has shown up in wood chips that utility companies or municipalities have stockpiled from brush or fallen tree clean up such as the devastation we experienced in the freak snow storm of October 1997. I guess you might call this sort of a “silent killer” since one seldom realizes this mulch is toxic until the plants begin to die. However, “toxic” mulch may have a very strong, chemical-like odor. If this is what you have, it should either be avoided or diluted with lots of soil or other mulch material. Or you can spread it out in a thin layer to be de-toxified by weather and Mother Nature. This may take several weeks to accomplish, however.

Another concern that some gardeners have had is over the possible attraction of carpenter ants and other such insects to wood mulch. We know carpenter ants can find a suitable home in wood mulch around the foundation planting. We also know ants, both carpenter and non-carpenter (what we call sweet and grease ants) are nearly everywhere all

the time so not mulching will not necessarily reduce one's exposure to them. Gardeners need to weigh the benefits of the mulch, and they can also be selective in what mulch material they use. Course pine bark mulch, for example, may be less attractive to carpenter ants than, lets say, fine cedar bark mulch. And while I am not a really big fan myself of the non-organic mulches like marble chips, gravel, and the like, they do provide an option.

Regardless of what mulch you decided to use, give some serious thought as to what you want to accomplish with it, what choices you have, their cost, and care and longevity. Happy Gardening!

Questions about mulch and how to use it can be addressed to the Master Gardener volunteers of Cornell Cooperative Extension of Columbia County, 479 Route 66, Hudson, NY 12534 by phone at (518) 828-3346 or via email at columbia@cornell.edu.