

Just Say No To Bugs

You are not home alone. Your home is also the primary residence of thousands of freeloading creepie-crawlies...and that's not even counting the millions of mattress-dwellers and other microscopic mites that are cozying up inside dustballs all over the house.

Then there are the bigger pests that occasionally share your home – rodents, bats, birds, squirrels, raccoons, skunks and other pesky wildlife.

Insects and animals large or small can make life miserable and can even render some homes uninhabitable. It's unhealthy for you and a danger to your home to allow these intruders to take up residence, so they should be rooted out as soon as they are discovered.

But discovering them is itself a challenge. The termite that does all the damage, for instance, is a whitish, ant-like creature about the size of a piece of rice. Not that you're likely to see one, since they remain in the ground, where they live, or in the wood of the house, which they eat.

When termites have to travel between ground and wood, they build "shelter tubes" of sand, mud, and excrement that they pass through on the way to dinner. These can often be spotted on foundation walls and floors. Once inside a tasty stud, nobody would know they're holding a banquet because the outside of the wood remains intact.

To protect your property, do not store scrap wood or firewood around the house. Avoid moisture problems caused by faulty drainage or poor ventilation, because that's the environment in which termites thrive. And keep all wood out of direct contact with the ground.

Carpenter ants can also do serious structural damage, not by eating the wood but by tunneling through it. They are much bigger than regular ants, sometimes up to one inch long. Sawdust is their signature, because as they hollow out a home they push the sawdust out of the way. You can sometimes hear them munching noisily inside a wall or ceiling.

If you can see or hear them, you can perhaps figure out where they nest. That's where you should drill a hole and spray, because if the queen is poisoned, your problem is over.

Cockroaches are less destructive, but equally unwelcome. They love dark and moist locations, such as under the sink or refrigerator, and come out at night to scavenge food scraps. But even a spotless house isn't immune, because these voracious little critters will eat the glue and paste found in books and wallpaper!

Nests have to be located or poison bait put out that will be carried back to the nest. If you do this, take care to keep bait away from children and pets.

Rats and mice won't bring your house tumbling down, but they are a serious health threat to humans. Since they can squeeze through an opening just half an inch wide, it's important to seal cracks and holes in, around, and beneath the home. You can often hear them passing through the walls but other signs are their droppings, chewing marks on wood or wiring, and smudge marks along walls and around holes.

Traps and bait are common solutions but you should choose a method where you don't have to touch the dead rodent to dispose of it.

If raccoons, skunks, squirrels or other large animals take up residence in the attic, chimney or beneath the house, they should be removed by wildlife specialists because they can carry serious diseases, such as rabies. To keep them out, these areas should be capped.

Bats dine out in the evening, so turning off the lights and leaving an open exit can sometimes give homeowners time to seal up cracks and openings. If there are raccoons or squirrels in the attic, sometimes leaving a light on and playing a radio can persuade them to find more congenial quarters elsewhere.

