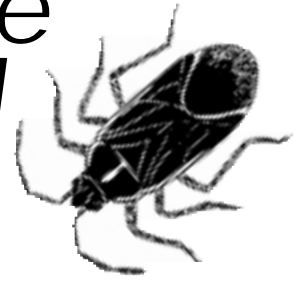


How to Choose a Pest Control Company



Household ants, fire ants, cockroaches, fleas, ticks, termites, wood-destroying beetles, gnats and flies, clothes moths and carpet beetles, and stored product pests are some of the common pests that people encounter in and around homes. While most are merely a nuisance, some pests can cause serious damage to our homes or property. Other arthropod pests bite, sting, and transmit disease-causing agents.

Insects and other arthropods can fly, crawl, or be carried inside a structure. In the Southeast, different pests are a problem during different months of the whole year. Year-round pest management programs are needed for control of these general pests.

If you do your own pest control with a single product, control will be difficult because controlling pest infestations requires multiple products and methods.

Many people elect to contract the services of a pest control company to take care of their pest problems. Pest Control Operators (PCOs) who are licensed in the state of Alabama must take and pass an examination administered by the state. In order to maintain their license, they must attend training on a continual basis.

There are many pest control companies in the state. The following are some guidelines to help you choose the best company for you. Whichever service you need, read and understand the contract you sign. Ask the salesperson to clarify anything you do not understand or with which you do not feel comfortable. Check with the Better Business Bureau or a present customer of the company to make sure the company you select has a good record.

Pest control services can be separated into two different categories. The first category is "general household pest control" (also called "pest control" in the industry); the other category is "termite control."

General Household Pest Control

If you have problems with pests such as ants, fleas, cockroaches, or occasional invaders such as millipedes and ladybugs, you are looking for someone who can give you General Household Pest Control.

Choosing a pest control company generally comes down to two things. First, you must evaluate the effec-

tiveness of a company's pest management methods. Second, you must decide if you are satisfied with the customer service you received.

Evaluating Pest Management Methods

When evaluating the effectiveness of pest management methods, ask for specific steps that the PCO will use in his or her pest management program. The Alabama Cooperative Extension System recommends the use of Integrated Pest Management (IPM) techniques. IPM incorporates all available control methods into a pest management program. IPM requires homeowner cooperation for maximum effectiveness. Control methods include sanitation, exclusion, and the use of multiple pest management products.



Sanitation

Sanitation will aid in pest management. Do the following:

- Keep the kitchen area clean.
- Wipe down countertops, stove, and cabinets with warm, soapy water.
- Keep food in sealed containers, including pet food that may be stored outside.
- Keep garbage cans covered.
- Take out the trash at least once a week.
- Do not leave water standing in the sink. Water is the most important factor for pest survival.
- Clean out cabinets. Beetles or moths found in the kitchen area may have come from food that is infested. Check foods such as cereals, rice, and grains to see if they are infested. Discard infested food. Vacuum cabinets thoroughly and wipe surfaces clean before the pest control operator arrives. Leave the cabinets empty so the PCO has a clear treatment area. Chemical treatment should be confined to the cracks and crevices of the cabinet because that is where the insect pests will hide. Do not replace cabinet items until the treatment is dry.
- Clean out closets. Beetles or moths found in the bedroom, hall, or closet areas may be coming from clothing or carpeting. Check woolen sweaters and rugs for moth cases or beetle larvae as well as the adult forms.

Dry cleaning clothes before storing them will make clothes less attractive to these destructive insects. Dry cleaning after an infestation is discovered will also kill these destructive insects. Thoroughly brushing clothing or rugs outside will also help eliminate these insects. After inspecting and cleaning clothes or rugs, clean out closets and thoroughly vacuum the inside before the PCO arrives. For more information, see Extension publication ANR-159, "Controlling Carpet Beetles and Clothes Moths."

- Fix leaky pipes that can cause moisture problems. Moisture problems cause mold and fungi to grow. Mold and fungi are used as food by some beetles and other small nuisance insects such as psocids. Chemicals alone cannot effectively control these types of insects unless the moisture problem is solved.



Exclusion

Another important part of controlling pests in your home is to make sure that they stay outside. Repair window screens and doors to exclude flying insects such as gnats, mosquitoes, and flies. Repair door sweeps to exclude crawling insects such as cockroaches or pillbugs.

Pest Management Products

There are numerous pest management products available to homeowners and pest control operators. These products can be found in bait, dust, granular, and liquid formulations. Attractants, pheromones that confuse insects during mating (confusants), repellents, and glue boards are also practical in many instances. Always follow the use and disposal directions on the label. The label is the law. See Extension publication ANR-500B, *Alabama Pest Management Handbook—Volume 2*, for other pest management recommendations.



Evaluating Customer Service

When evaluating a company's customer service, ask around. Customer satisfaction is mostly a matter of personal preference. Ask your friends or relatives the following questions about their pest control service:

- Why have they selected that company?
- Have they had bad experiences with other companies?

These are some questions to ask yourself:

- What is your chemical tolerance? Are you sensitive? Are you indifferent?
- Do the proposed techniques fit your lifestyle? If your PCO asked you to carry out all the suggestions for

sanitation and pest exclusion listed above, would you be willing to do them? Some pest control companies have carpentry units that will do minor repairs such as fixing leaky pipes, repairing window screens, and caulking cracks for an additional fee. Do you need to look for a pest control company that can offer you these additional services?

- Do you prefer monthly, quarterly, or yearly pest control? Some contracts will allow you to call the company only when you have a pest problem. Products have changed over the years so that monthly applications to nonharborage areas are not necessary. Even though most PCOs service monthly, homeowners can investigate other options.

The trend is toward more extensive service with fewer trips. One advantage to monthly pest control is that someone should be looking at your house for pest problems monthly. One disadvantage of monthly pest control is that homeowners insist that PCOs apply a chemical treatment monthly whether there is a pest problem or not. Monthly chemical treatments may not be necessary and may cause undue exposure to the occupants. Would you be willing to have someone monitor your house monthly and apply a chemical treatment as needed?

Sometimes it is not even necessary for the PCO to enter the home to take care of pest problems. Seventy-seven percent of all insects live outside the home. Servicing from the outside does not require you to be home when the servicing is done, which is convenient if you have a busy schedule. Outside treatments also reduce inside exposure to occupants. Does this type of service fit your lifestyle?

- If you chose quarterly or yearly pest control, will you be charged if you call the PCO for a problem between scheduled visits? As a rule, materials that are registered for General Household Pest Control will not last for a whole year. However, you are buying the expertise of the PCO, inclusive of inspections in inaccessible voids where insects live, such as attics, soffits, eaves, wall voids, built-in furniture, and the like.

Other questions that may tell you about the company include:

- Does the PCO appear neat and professional?
- Is your PCO on time?
- Is the PCO able to answer your questions satisfactorily?

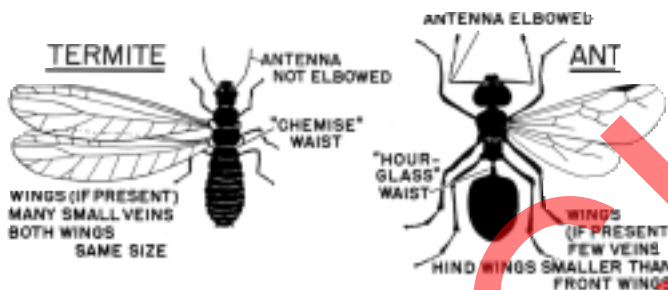
Other tips include:

- Compare prices and service, and remember, the lowest price does not always mean the best deal when shopping for a pest control professional.
- Make sure that you and the pest control company are clear on the terms of your contract. Be sure the contract includes the name of the company, the length of

service for the contract, what services are covered, and the price.

More details to check on the contract:

- Make sure to look for possible exclusion clauses in the contract. Exclusion clauses specify the things that can cause the contract to be canceled.
- Can either you or the pest control company cancel? Will there be penalties assessed if you cancel the contract?
- Is there an arbitration clause or other method to settle possible disputes?
- Ask to see a certificate of insurance. Does the company carry complete insurance coverage with adequate coverage including an "errors and omissions" clause? An "errors and omissions" clause covers things like inadvertent staining on carpets or accidental breakage of items.
- Be sure that the company is licensed, meaning that there is a Certified Operator in charge within 100 miles of the office.
- The contract should be signed by both parties.



Subterranean Termite Control

If you have a termite infestation in your home, we recommend that you DO NOT attempt to do your own treatment. Contract the services of a pest control operator who has experience with termites. Pest control professionals have training, expensive equipment that is not feasible for a homeowner to purchase, and products not available to the homeowner.

PCOs are trained in special application procedures to ensure the best protection for your home. These procedures include drilling, rodding, and application to voids that are beyond most homeowner's expertise. These procedures are an acquired skill. If you need a pest control operator for termite control, consider the following, *in addition to the evaluation criteria listed under General Household Pest Control*:

- Ask if the company has experience in dealing with subterranean termites. If they do, ask for the number of years they have worked in termite control, and ask for the number of jobs completed.
- Ask for references to previous subterranean termite work that has been completed.

- Do not feel pressured by a company to buy a treatment in the spot. Take a few days to thoroughly research treatment options and different pest control companies.
- Compare prices with contract coverage from different pest control companies. (See section on contracts.) Get their recommendations concerning the most effective method of treatment for you. See Extension publications ANR-1022, "IPM Tactics for Termite Control," and ANR-1035, "Formosan Subterranean Termites," for information about treatment methods.
- Make sure that the pest control company makes a complete inspection of the entire building from crawl space to attic.
- Make sure your crawl space or attic is accessible and does not contain so much clutter that the PCO cannot do a proper inspection. In order to do the inspection, the PCO should carry protective clothing for crawl space inspections, plus a flashlight, a probe, a moisture meter, and a clipboard to draw a graph of the inspection areas. The inspection should determine the point of termite entry into a structure and the extent of the infestation. The pest control operator cannot recommend the proper treatment for your structure without a thorough inspection.
- Be sure to get a written report that tells you the location(s) of the infestation(s) and the probable point(s) of entry into the structure. The report should include a graph indicating areas of termite activity. Understand that this is a visual inspection only. Additional damage may be found in concealed or hidden areas. The graph cannot guarantee that all damage is represented. Further inspection by a building expert or structural engineer may be required where extensive damage has occurred. It stands to reason that the older the home, the greater the probability of damage or concealed areas (areas that have been covered or repaired).



Contracts

While many people think that they are receiving a termite "bond," legally speaking, you are signing a "contract." Ask your attorney for the distinctions between "bonds," "contracts," and "warrantees."

- Be aware that there are many different types of contracts for termite control. Contract wording will vary from company to company. Contracts also will vary with the type of construction that is being treated. Note that contracts for bait treatments will differ from contracts for soil termiticide treatments. In all cases, read the contract and know what you are getting.

- Termite contracts generally have two sides. Read both sides thoroughly.
- Some companies will offer a contract with a “retreatment only” clause. “Retreatment only” generally means that the company will come out and retreat your house if termites infest the structure after they have treated it. The company will not assume liability for damage done by the termites. There may be a number of exclusion clauses, so be sure to read and understand the contract you sign.
- Some contracts contain a “damage replacement” clause. “Damage replacement” clauses usually mean that the company will replace and pay for any damages incurred by the termites while you have been under contract with the company. There may be a number of exclusion clauses associated with this type of contract also, so be sure to read and understand the contract you sign.
- If your house is constructed with any Exterior Insulating Finishing System (EIFS), synthetic stucco, rigid foam board insulation, or any other decorative facade that is installed below the soil line (below grade), many pest control companies will not issue either a “retreatment only” or “damage replacement” type contract unless contact with the soil is cut off, leaving an inspection space of 6 to 8 inches. The inspection space is now a requirement in the Southern Building Code.
- Any type of construction that will create “conductive conditions,” or conditions that are favorable to termite infestation and survival, will disqualify many homeowners from receiving contracts with “retreatment only” or “damage replacement” clauses. Some conducive conditions are leaking roofs, landscape plants that are too close to the house, water sprinklers directed toward the house, and wood-to-ground contact. There are many more.
- Be aware that the contract for treatment of an existing subterranean termite infestation may not be the same as the contract for an annual reinspection.
- Make sure you have a contract before any work is begun.
- Contracts should contain the name and address of the pest control firm.
- Make sure you know the length of time for which the contract is good. Common contract lengths are the “5-year,” good for 5 years; the “lifetime,” good for as long as you own the home; and “treatment with no extension,” only good for the treatment and usually issued to homes with serious conducive conditions such as EIFS.
- Know which parties can cancel the contract and at what anniversary date.
- Look on the back for disclaimers. Look for “small print.”
- Look for an arbitration clause or other methods to settle disputes.
- Ask if the contract makes any distinction between the Formosan subterranean termite and native subterranean termite. Any company whose contract makes a distinction probably realizes the need for this separation. Research indicates that the Formosan subterranean termite is more aggressive. See Extension publication ANR-1035, “Formosan Subterranean Termites,” for more information. (The Formosan subterranean termite has been found in Baldwin, Mobile, Lee, and Calhoun counties.)
- Remember that the wording of the contract is only as strong as the parties involved. Make sure the company with which you contract has adequate coverage and the financial stability to perform all contractual obligations.

- Final details:
- Call the Better Business Bureau or the Department of Agriculture, Division of Plant Industries, and ask if the company with whom you may contract has any outstanding complaints. If they do, ask for the nature of those complaints.
 - Lastly, contact the Alabama Cooperative Extension System office in your county if you have other questions or if you want to verify the identity of the insect infesting your house.

The key to any decision is having confidence in the company you chose. Pay attention to the value and the service you expect for the price you pay. Also, remember that good pest control cannot be achieved without homeowner cooperation.



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For more information, call your county Extension office. Look in your telephone directory under your county's name to find the number.

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