

Are They Swarming Ants or Termites? How Do I Tell?



When you see winged insects swarming around your Oklahoma home in spring, the burning question is: are they ants or termites? Let's review how to distinguish them and when to seek help.

1. Swarming Time - It Happens Each Spring

- **Subterranean termites** typically swarm March–May in Oklahoma.
- **Carpenter ants** swarm in nearly the same time window: March through May.

Because swarms overlap, timing alone will not do. Look for physical traits and signposts.

2. Wing Differences

Feature	Termites	Ants
Wings	4 equal-length wings, about twice body length; Fall off after swarm.	2 longer front wings, 2 shorter hind wings. Wings stay attached
Discarded wings	Common around entry points and windowsills — a clear termite sign.	Rarely see shed wings; they keep them attached.

3. Body Shape & Waist

- **Termites** have cylindrical bodies without a narrow waist (tube-like shape).
 - **Ants** boast a “pinched” waist separating thorax and abdomen.
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4. Antennae

- **Termite** antennae are straight or gently curved (bead-like).
 - **Ant** antennae are distinctively elbowed or bent.
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5. Color & Texture

- **Termites** are soft-bodied and pale to dark brown/black.
 - **Ants** are darker (red/black), harder-bodied.
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6. Nesting & Damage Clues

- **Termites:** Seek moisture and subterranean access. Look for mud tubes on foundations or hollow wood with mud lining.
 - **Carpenter ants:** Nest in decayed wood, leave smooth tunnels or wood shavings (sawdust piles), but do not eat wood.
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7. Behavior & Habitat

- **Termites** hide within wood or underground tunnels, are blind, and follow pheromone trails.
 - **Ants** forage in visible trails, build soil mounds or colonies in structural voids, and have open nests.
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8. What You Should Do

If They are Termites:

- Discovering termite winged swarms or discarded wings near your home is a red flag — it likely indicates a **subterranean termite** infestation nearby.
- Call a licensed pest control professional. Termites can cause severe, expensive damage if left untreated.

If They are Carpenter Ants:

- While less destructive, they still weaken wood by tunneling.
- Manage them by:
 - Removing decayed wood and tree limbs near structures.
 - Sealing cracks and gaps in the foundation, siding, or window frames.
 - Contacting a pest tech if large colonies or recurring swarms are seen.

How to Tell the Difference Between Ants & Termites

This video clearly shows key features — waist shape, wing structure, antennae — making it easy to use as a reference during swarming events.

Summary: Quick Identification Key

1. **Are wings equal and long?** → Termites
2. **Is body smooth without waist?** → Termites
3. **Are antennae straight?** → Termites
4. **Are there mud tubes or discarded wings near wood?** → Termites
5. **Are wings uneven, waist pinched, antennae elbowed?** → Ants
6. **Is there sawdust but no wood-eating damage?** → Carpenter ants

If you determine they are termites, do not delay! Early treatment can save you big costs. If they are ants, focus on removing nesting sites and sealing entry points. Either way, being a vigilant gardener in Oklahoma means observing spring swarms closely and responding correctly.

By spotting these differences: wing symmetry, waist shape, antennae, and habitat signatures. You will confidently be able to tell whether it is a swarming ant or termite, saving your home and garden from unintentional infestation and damage.

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