

## Take Steps to Correct Lawn Problems Now

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How does your lawn look now? Many of us, myself included, are having lawn problems now. If your lawn is like mine, you may wish to take a few steps now to turn your lawn around before cold weather arrives. Otherwise, you may find you have more serious lawn problems come next spring.

There are several likely causes of the current lawn problems. Chinch bugs could be causing problems in St. Augustine lawns. Spittlebugs could be causing centipede problems. Fungus diseases could be a problem in any of our lawn grasses. It is also that time of year when sod webworms are being found in some area lawns. Sod webworms can pose a serious threat because of their rapid feeding.

If you have a St. Augustine lawn that is developing straw-colored patches, particularly in sunny areas, chinch bugs are the first pests you should check for. Chinch bugs live in the lawn, near the soil level, and suck the sap from the grass. This causes the grass to turn yellow and die. Chinch bugs tend to feed in groups, so dead patches of grass get larger as the chinch bugs spread through the grass.

There are many things that can cause off-color areas to occur in lawns. So, make sure you actually find significant numbers of chinch bugs before treating your lawn for chinch bugs. To find chinch bugs, part the grass near yellowed areas and look at the soil surface and base of the grass plants. Examine several different areas if chinch bugs aren't immediately found.

A flotation technique can also be used to detect chinch bug infestations. Cut both ends out of a metal can, such as a coffee can, and push one end two to three inches into the soil on green or yellowing grass (not dead grass). Slowly fill the can with water and look for chinch bugs that should float to the top within five minutes. Keep the water level above the grass surface. If nothing emerges in the first area, examine at least three or four other areas. Another, less labor-intensive option is to use a small hand-held vacuum cleaner to vacuum the grass near damaged areas. Remove the vacuum filter, dump the contents, and look for chinch bugs. Repeat in several damaged areas. Adult chinch bugs are about one-tenth of an inch long, black, and with white markings on the back. The immature chinch bugs, which are red, are even smaller. If you would like to see photos or would like more information on chinch bugs, visit this University of Florida IFAS Extension website, <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/LH036>.

In the past, diazinon, chlorpyrifos, or Orthene were the insecticides customarily used to control chinch bugs and other lawn insects. However, these products are being withdrawn from the market by their manufacturers. Chlorpyrifos is already gone, and diazinon supplies will soon be gone also, if not already. Orthene will no longer be labeled for use on residential lawns by the end of the year. In fact, you may not be able to find any Orthene with a lawn label now. However, there are some new products for lawn insect control. I recently used Bayer Advanced Garden Power Force Multi-Insect Killer, which contains cyfluthrin, to spray areas of my lawn damaged by chinch bugs. You may also find products containing imadacloprid or permethrin

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that are labeled for use on lawn insect pests. When spraying for chinch bugs, only treat the damaged areas and a ten to fifteen foot or so buffer around them. There is usually no need to spray the whole lawn.

Spittlebugs may be causing off-color areas in some centipede lawns. Spittlebugs are the black bugs, with two orange stripes across their back, that you often see when mowing the lawn. Don't worry about a few spittlebugs. But if you see lots of them, examine your grass closely. If the grass blades have yellow or red stripes down them and the grass later turns brown, then there is a good chance that spittlebugs are causing the problem. You can use the same insecticides recommended for control of chinch bugs. But, be sure to apply the insecticide in a sufficient enough volume of water so as to flush it down through the thatch layer where the young spittlebugs are developing and feeding in masses of spittle.

Sod webworm damage is also being seen with increasing frequency in area lawns. Sod webworms feed at night, so don't be surprised if you can't find them during the day. The greenish or tan caterpillars will be resting, curled up near the soil line. If you have damaged spots in your lawn, look closely for notched leaf blades, the telltale signs of their chewing damage. You may also find a dusty material left behind by the feeding of the caterpillars. Sod webworms can be controlled with the same insecticides as the other lawn insects. But you may also use insecticides that contain the active ingredient, *Bacillus thuringiensis*, a bacterium that only kills caterpillars and won't harm the beneficial insects in your lawn.



If your lawn is developing spots that yellow and then turn brown, and you cannot find any of the insect pests, then you may consider the possibility of a fungus disease, particularly if you have been receiving very frequent rains. Possible lawn fungicides to use include those having the active ingredients chlorothalonil, propiconazol, or thiophanate-methyl, such as Bayer Advanced Lawn Fungus Control or Scotts Lawn Fungus Control.

Don't underestimate the importance of proper cultural practices in helping you manage lawn problems also. Mow weekly, with a sharp blade on a high setting, but don't mow when the grass is wet. If you haven't fertilized since spring, an application of a low-nitrogen, high potash (potassium) winterizer fertilizer, such as 5-0-15 or 5-0-20 could help now. Avoid high-nitrogen types of fertilizer now. Remember, nitrogen is the first number in the fertilizer analysis.

If you would like further information on any of these pests, on lawn care, or any other gardening topics, visit the UF-IFAS Extension website for publications at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu>. You may also wish to visit the UF-IFAS Extension website for Leon County at <http://leon.ifas.ufl.edu>.

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*Photo by David W. Marshall, UF-IFAS Extension in Leon County: sod webworm damage.jpg*