

Chinch Bugs Invade St. Augustine Lawns  
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St. Augustine is typically a blue green, thick-growing grass. Unfortunately some St. Augustine lawns are yellowing and dying. Chinch bugs have invaded our lawns.

Chinch bugs attack the lawn near the ground level. They suck plant juices, yellowing and then killing the lawn. Although they may attack other grasses, I have only seen them damage St. Augustine lawns. Damaged lawns quickly yellow and die turning a straw brown color. Young chinch bugs are red to pink with a white band across their back. As they age, chinch bugs turn gray to black with a white band or patch on the back. Adults are one-eighth to one-tenth inch long – about the size of a large ant.

Chinch bugs are hard to catch. To find them, search in the green grass at the edge of a dead patch. Part the grass quickly and pull back the thatch. If you do not see them, pull up a handful of grass including the thatch. Look inside the leaf sheaths where the grass blades come together at the bottom of the plant.

Another method is to cut out both ends of a coffee can. Sink one end into the ground several inches in the green grass at the edge of the dead. Fill the can with water and keep the water level up for five minutes. Watch the top of the water for floating chinch bugs. Do not overflow the container or chinch bugs may escape. Whatever method you use, check several areas if you do not see them at first.

Grow St. Augustine grass properly to reduce the effect of chinch bugs. Heavily fertilized St. Augustine lawns are more susceptible to chinch bugs. To reduce chinch bug injury, use slow-release fertilizers in the summer and reduce fertilizer rates by half.

Mowing affects the size and strength of the root system. Stronger roots help resist insect attack. Mow St. Augustine grass three inches tall and mow often enough so that you do not remove more than one-third of the leaf blade at any one time. If the lawn gets too tall, reduce the height slowly by cutting off one-third of the leaf blade each time.

Sharpen the blade on your mower. Sharper blades give a cleaner cut and reduce stress on the grass and can make the lawn more resistant to chinch bug injury. When removing the mower blade to sharpen or replace it, be certain to remove the spark plug wire to prevent accidentally cranking the mower.

Watering affects chinch bugs. These bugs like to begin their attack in hot, dry areas. Chinch bugs also live in the thatch layer of the lawn. Over watering and over fertilization can make the thatch layer thicker. Water your lawn properly to reduce chinch bug injury. Wait until the lawn wilts slightly to water. Then water with three-quarter to one inch of water. Place an empty pie pan, tuna can or similar pan under your irrigation system and run and time it until it applies this much water. This will tell you how long to irrigate each time.

To see if your thatch layer is too thick, cut down through the turf and measure the thickness of the thatch layer. If the thatch layer is thicker than one inch on St. Augustine lawns, it is probably too thick. De-thatching is generally done in May or June, so contact your local Extension Office for options this late in the year.

Chinch bugs are one of the few lawn pests that require insecticide treatment. Chinch bugs can quickly destroy a St. Augustine lawn! You will probably need one or more insecticide treatments two to three weeks apart to reduce the problem to manageable levels. Read and follow all label directions when using pesticides.

Different insecticides kill different stages of the insect. No insecticide does a good job of killing the insect's eggs. You are likely to need more than one application for serious chinch bug problems. Select chemicals from differing classes of chemicals for repeat treatments. While not necessary, this may give better control and reduce the chance of insects developing resistance to the pesticide. Chemical classes and pesticides you can select from include the carbamates (Sevin containing carbaryl) and the pyrethroids (cyfluthrin, permethrin, deltamethrin, lambda-cyhalothrin and bifenthrin). For more information see this website where I found much of this information - <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/LH036>