HORTICULTURE COLUMN

CHINCH BUGS

St. Augustinegrass lawns are beginning to look wilted in sunny areas. Close inspection reveals that chinch bugs are becoming a problem. Yes, it is chinch bug time again! Chinch bugs (ch is pronounced like the ch in cheer) feed on St. Augustinegrass lawns and occur primarily during hot, dry weather. They may cause serious damage if not controlled.

Turfgrass damage

Improper mowing, watering and fertilizing can create a layer of dead stems that are slow to decay. This thatch layer is a perfect hiding place for chinch bugs. Summer fertilization with water soluble nitrogen sources encourages leafy growth that is prone to attack. Instead, use minimal applications of slowly available nitrogen fertilizers only in the spring and fall. If lawns yellow in the summer, try an application of liquid iron for a greener color without the growth response. Mow grass at three inches when it gets to be four and a half inches or mow it at four inches when it grows to six inches.

If you are in part of the county that hasn’t had much rain yet, water the lawn thoroughly when over forty percent of the grass shows signs of wilting. Always wait until the grass wilts to water. Apply one half to three quarters inch of water any time you water to encourage deep rooting.

Chinch bug damage usually occurs as a patch with a brown, dead center and yellowish margin. These dry looking dead spots tend to appear first in the hottest areas in full sun next to a building, driveway or sidewalk. It seems chinch bugs get the blame and often unjustly for everything. Be sure the damage is not due to other reasons.

Chinch bugs will not be active in the dead grass, but feed in the thinning, yellow band of grass around the dead patch. Use a large juice or coffee can to play detective and search for the tiny pests. Cut out both ends of the can and push it down into the soil about three inches deep at the edge of the yellow border. You will probably have to cut some of the runners to get the can into the soil. Very slowly, add water to the can so you flood the area and force the critters to swim for high ground. Keep the water level just under the edge of the can so you don't wash them over the side. Continue to add water for about five minutes.
Many insects may float to the surface. Fortunately, most of them are harmless or even beneficial. Chinch bugs are tiny. The young ones are red and white while the mature adults are the size of small ants, with white wings which cross in an x over their back.

If you find more than 20 to 25 chinch bugs per square foot, it's time to counter attack. Apply an approved pesticide to the off color area and a buffer area about ten foot wide surrounding it. Use products labeled for use on lawns such as those containing Diazinon, Orthene, and Dursban.

Hose-end sprayers tend to work well, allowing you to apply enough water to wash the chemicals into the thatch layer where chinch bugs feed. If more chinch bugs are found, retreatment is needed but read the label and follow directions on when retreatment is allowed.

If you suspect chinch bugs are causing damage but cannot identify the critters, we will look at the sample and help you identify the problem. Bring a shoe box size sample of sod, soil and roots from the thinning area. Master Gardeners are available in the Plant Clinic, Monday to Friday from 10am to 2pm. Call (321) 697-3000 for directions.

(Images are from the "Turfgrass Insects Sheet 1" by D.E. Short and J.L. Castner of the Department of Entomology and Nematology of the UF/Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences.)