

Chinch Bugs: Know What to Look for, Save Your Lawn



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BARTOW -- Chinch bugs are tiny insects that feed on the stolons - or above ground stems -- of St. Augustine grass. They are approximately 1/8 inch long and have shiny white wings that lie flat on their backs. Adults may have long or short wings. Younger bugs are red and have a white line that crosses their backs.

Chinch bugs insert their sucking mouthparts into the stolons and crowns of St. Augustine grass and extract the fluids. They can quickly kill a large patch of turf. They are most often found in open, sunny areas, especially drought-stressed areas near sidewalks and driveways.

We have enjoyed several years of good chinch bug control thanks to products containing the insecticide bifenthrin, which belongs to a class of insecticides called synthetic pyrethroids. This product is available to commercial pest control operators who spray home lawns, as well as to homeowners who manage their own lawns. Unfortunately, we are finding many cases of chinch bug resistance to bifenthrin, as well as other products in the same insecticide class such as permethrin.

If you or your lawn spray company use this type of product, be watching for signs that the chinch bugs are still alive. There isn't a good replacement for bifenthrin at the moment and many lawn spray companies are going back to old products such as Sevin, which is also available to homeowners. Keep in mind that damage from diseases, drought and insects looks very much the same.

Detection of live chinch bugs is of key importance and may be tricky for the beginner because these insects are small and fast. One technique involves getting down on hands and knees in an area of turf that appears to be affected but not dead, and searching for the insects. This is done by spreading the grass blades and underlying stolons apart to expose the tiny insects that are in and on the soil. Another detection method is called "soap flush" and is done by drenching a 2- by 2-foot area of turf with a solution of soapy water, (use 2 ounces of dish soap in 2 gallons water). The area is then observed for emerging chinch bugs for five minutes.

Continuing chinch bug infestations in a home lawn may require a chemical spray, particularly at the beginning of summer and then maybe again in August. If the pyrethroid sprays appear to be ineffective, call the extension office for current recommendations.

Homeowners can help reduce the incidence of chinch bugs by adopting sound cultural turf care practices. Rapid growth of St. Augustine grass resulting from over fertilizing with water-soluble nitrogen may increase the susceptibility to chinch bugs. Excessive thatch brought on by over fertilizing and over watering provides a habitat for chinch bugs. Mowing the lawn too short may also encourage chinch bug infestations.

Contributed by David Shibles, University of Florida IFAS Extension

Posted – Polk Voice - **October 11, 2006 12:04:16 PM**

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