

St Augustine Lawn Care
Willie Chance, UGA Extension, Houston County
wchance@uga.edu or (478) 987-2028

When you think of grass do you envision a thick, dark green lawn growing neatly up to the curb? If so, St. Augustine may be the grass for you. St. Augustine is a blue green, thick-growing grass with large leaves and stems. It is our most shade tolerant grass and has moderate drought tolerance. St. Augustine may have more pest problems than other grasses. Careful maintenance will help avoid some problems while pesticides may be needed for others.

Start right with St. Augustine. Soil sample and lime to bring the pH into a proper range. Soil pH should be between 6.0 and 7.0. This is very important to good growth. Lime and fertilizer should be tilled in before sodding. After sodding, if you find that the soil pH is low and needs lime, apply it over the top of the grass and water it in.

St. Augustine is generally established by sodding or sprigging. Till the area well and lay sod, or put in sprigs about four to six inches apart in rows twelve inches apart. The closer sprigs are, the more quickly they will cover. Cover at least part of the sprig with soil. Keep the soil moist but not wet. Let the grass blades dry between watering.

When selecting sod or sprigs, do not buy diseased turf. Beware of leaf spots with dark borders on leaves or mysteriously dying leaves and stems. Take a sample to your local Extension Office for a diagnosis. Buy sod that has plenty of roots and soil and a good color.

For established lawns - soil sample, lime and fertilize accordingly. You can fertilize up to three times a year if you like - in April, June and August. It is very important to use a slow release fertilizer since this reduces the potential for disease in St. Augustine lawns. Make sure the fertilizer has plenty of potassium. The first number in the fertilizer analysis indicates nitrogen percentage and the last number in an analysis indicates potassium percentage. For instance, 5-10-15 has 5 percent nitrogen and 15 percent potassium (or potash) in it. Fertilizers should generally have at least two-thirds as much potassium as nitrogen for St. Augustine.

Gray leaf spot is a fungus disease that shows up on the leaves as gray spots with dark borders. Leaves then die. Diseased lawns thin out or die from below. This disease is worse in hot, humid summer weather and on new St. Augustine lawns. Lawn stresses can make the disease worse.

Avoid disease problems by using good cultural practices.

1. Do not over-fertilize. Use little or no nitrogen in the hot, humid summer months and use the fertilization practices mentioned above. If disease strikes, do not fertilize again until the disease is under control.
2. Water only once a week applying three quarter to one inch of water each time. Water between 10:00 p.m. and 10:00 a.m. to slow disease spread. Do not let the lawn remain wet for long periods of time.
3. Correct stresses on the lawn like drought, herbicide injury, compacted soils and watering the lawn too often.

4. If the thatch layer is thicker than one inch, you will want to dethatch the lawn in May or June.
5. Spraying a fungicide can slow disease spread but fungicides alone may not control this disease. Use a combination of fungicides and cultural practices to control this problem. These practices may help to prevent other diseases on St. Augustine as well. For more information on turf diseases, see <http://pubs.caes.uga.edu/caespubs/pubcd/B1233.htm>

Chinch bugs can also be a problem in St. Augustine lawns. These pests yellow the grass before it finally dies and turns straw brown. They are more of a problem in hot, dry summer weather. Some cultural practices reduce chinch bug injury but many infestations also require pesticides to control them. Pesticides for chinch bugs include liquid Sevin (carbaryl), cyfluthrin, bifenthrin and others. If you are spraying the pesticide, apply it to a wet lawn and lightly water it in. If you are using a granule, apply it to a dry lawn and water it in. For details, read and follow the directions on the pesticide label. You may have to apply the chemical twice 2 to 3 weeks apart for best control. For more information on chinch bug control see this publication online - <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/IN383> Use cultural methods and pesticides for best control.

Mow St. Augustine lawns two to three inches high. Start at lower heights in the spring and increase mowing height as the weather gets hot and dry. Mow often enough to remove no more than one third of the leaf blade at one time. Keep your mower blade sharp to make the lawn more attractive.

St. Augustine lawns can be like a thick carpet – cushioning our feet and providing a place for the children to romp and play. Proper care helps to keep these lawns healthy and to avoid problems that are difficult or expensive to solve. For more information see <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/LH010>