How to Treat Lawn Fungus and Brown Patch in Florida

Maintaining a lush, vibrant lawn in South Florida is a point of pride for many homeowners. However, the same subtropical climate that allows turfgrass to thrive year-round also creates the perfect environment for lawn diseases. High humidity, frequent rainfall, and warm temperatures provide ideal conditions for fungal pathogens to take hold. Among the most common and destructive of these diseases is Brown Patch, also known as Large Patch when it affects warm-season grasses. Understanding how to identify, treat, and prevent lawn fungus is essential for keeping your yard healthy and beautiful.

Florida's unique environmental conditions mean that lawn care requires a specialized approach. The sandy soils, distinct wet and dry seasons, and specific turfgrass varieties used in the region all play a role in disease development. When fungal infections strike, they can quickly turn a pristine lawn into a patchwork of dead and dying grass. By learning to recognize the early signs of disease and implementing proper cultural practices, homeowners can minimize the impact of these unsightly blemishes.

This comprehensive guide will walk you through everything you need to know about managing lawn fungus in Florida. We will cover how to identify common diseases like Brown Patch, Dollar Spot, Gray Leaf Spot, and Take-All Root Rot. We will also explore the critical connection between your watering and fertilizing habits and the likelihood of fungal outbreaks. Finally, we will provide actionable steps for applying treatments, adjusting your lawn care routine, and knowing when it is time to call in a professional.

Identifying Common Florida Lawn Diseases

The first step in treating any lawn problem is accurate identification. While many fungal diseases cause similar symptoms, such as discolored patches or thinning turf, there are distinct characteristics that can help you determine which pathogen is attacking your grass. In Florida, several common diseases frequently affect popular turfgrass varieties like St. Augustine, Zoysia, and Bermuda grass.

Brown Patch and Large Patch

Brown Patch, caused by the fungus *Rhizoctonia solani*, is one of the most prevalent lawn diseases in Florida. When this fungus attacks warm-season grasses, it is often referred to as Large Patch. The disease typically manifests as roughly circular patches of thinned, light brown, or yellowing grass. These patches can range from a few inches to several feet in diameter and may expand rapidly under favorable conditions.

One of the distinguishing features of Large Patch is the appearance of the grass blades at the outer edges of the affected area. During active infection, the margins of the patch may have an orange or yellowish halo. If you pull gently on a blighted grass blade, it will easily separate from the runner, and the base of the blade will appear dark and rotted. This disease is most active during the cooler months of fall and spring when temperatures are mild and moisture is abundant.

Dollar Spot

Dollar Spot gets its name from the small, silver-dollar-sized spots of dead grass it creates. While the individual spots are small, they can coalesce into larger, irregular areas of blighted turf if left untreated. The disease is caused by the fungus *Clarireedia jacksonii* (formerly *Sclerotinia homoeocarpa*) and is most common in the spring and early summer.

A key identifying feature of Dollar Spot is the lesions it causes on individual grass blades. These lesions are typically light tan with reddish-brown borders and often span the entire width of the blade. In the early morning, when dew is present on the grass, you may also notice a white, cobweb-like fungal growth called mycelium covering the affected areas. Dollar Spot tends to thrive in lawns that are deficient in nitrogen and experience prolonged periods of leaf wetness.

Gray Leaf Spot

Gray Leaf Spot is a particularly troublesome disease for St. Augustine grass, which is widely planted across South Florida. Caused by the fungus *Pyricularia grisea*, this disease is most active during the hot, humid, and rainy summer months. It is characterized by the appearance of small, oval or irregular spots on the grass blades. These spots initially have dark brown borders and ash-gray centers.

As the disease progresses, the spots can enlarge and merge, causing entire blades to wither and die. From a distance, a lawn severely affected by Gray Leaf Spot may look scorched or as if it is suffering from drought stress. The rapid progression of this disease during the rainy season makes early detection and intervention crucial.

Take-All Root Rot

Unlike diseases that primarily affect the foliage, Take-All Root Rot attacks the root system of the grass. Caused by the fungus *Gaeumannomyces graminis var. graminis*, this disease can be devastating, particularly to St. Augustine grass. Because the damage occurs below ground, the above-ground symptoms often mimic those of drought or nutrient deficiency.

Affected areas typically appear as irregular patches of yellowing or thinning turf that gradually turn brown and die. The roots of infected grass will be dark brown or black, shortened, and rotted, making it difficult for the plant to absorb water and nutrients. Take-All Root Rot is often triggered by periods of high rainfall and stressed turfgrass, and it can be particularly challenging to manage once established.

The Connection Between Overwatering, Over-Fertilizing, and Fungus

Many homeowners inadvertently create the perfect environment for lawn fungus through their maintenance practices. In Florida, the two most common culprits are overwatering and improper fertilization. Understanding how these practices contribute to disease pressure is essential for long-term lawn health.

The Dangers of Overwatering

Fungi require moisture to survive and spread. When a lawn is overwatered, or when water is applied at the wrong time of day, the grass blades remain wet for extended periods. This prolonged leaf wetness is the primary trigger for many fungal diseases, including Brown Patch and Gray Leaf Spot.

In South Florida, the combination of frequent summer rains and automated irrigation systems often leads to excessive moisture. Watering in the late afternoon or evening is particularly problematic, as the grass stays damp throughout the night. To minimize

disease risk, it is recommended to water early in the morning, between 4:00 AM and 8:00 AM. This allows the grass blades to dry quickly as the sun rises, reducing the window of opportunity for fungal spores to germinate.

Additionally, it is important to calibrate your irrigation system and use a rain gauge or soil moisture sensor to avoid watering when it is not necessary. During the rainy season, you may need to turn off your automatic sprinklers entirely and water only when the grass shows signs of wilt.

The Impact of Over-Fertilizing

Fertilization is necessary for maintaining a healthy lawn, but applying too much fertilizer, or applying the wrong type at the wrong time, can encourage fungal growth. Nitrogen is a key nutrient for turfgrass, promoting lush, green growth. However, excessive nitrogen can result in a flush of tender, succulent leaf tissue that is highly susceptible to infection.

Applying high doses of quick-release nitrogen is a known trigger for Large Patch disease. When you force rapid growth, the grass plant expends energy producing new leaves at the expense of root development and natural defense mechanisms. To reduce disease pressure, it is advisable to use slow-release nitrogen sources and to follow the recommendations of the University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (UF/IFAS) for your specific grass type and region.

Furthermore, applying nitrogen fertilizer when a disease is already active can exacerbate the problem. If you suspect your lawn has a fungal infection, it is best to withhold nitrogen applications until the disease has been controlled.

Applying Curative and Preventative Fungicides

When cultural practices alone are not enough to manage a fungal outbreak, the use of fungicides may be necessary. Fungicides are chemical compounds designed to kill or inhibit the growth of fungi. They can be applied either curatively, to treat an existing infection, or preventatively, to protect the grass before a disease takes hold.

Curative Treatments

Curative fungicide applications are made after symptoms of a disease have already appeared. The goal is to stop the spread of the fungus and allow the grass to recover. When selecting a curative fungicide, it is important to choose a product that is labeled for the specific disease you are trying to control.

Common active ingredients found in curative fungicides include azoxystrobin, propiconazole, and thiophanate-methyl. These products are available in both granular and liquid formulations. For active infections, liquid fungicides are often preferred as they provide faster, more uniform coverage of the grass blades.

When applying a curative treatment, it is crucial to follow the manufacturer's instructions carefully regarding application rates and timing. In many cases, multiple applications spaced several weeks apart will be required to fully eradicate the disease. It is also important to note that fungicides cannot repair grass that is already dead; they only protect the healthy tissue and prevent further spread.

Preventative Treatments

For lawns with a history of chronic fungal issues, preventative fungicide applications can be an effective strategy. Preventative treatments are applied before conditions become favorable for disease development, creating a protective barrier on the grass.

In Florida, preventative applications for Large Patch are typically made in the early fall, just as temperatures begin to cool and before symptoms appear. For diseases like Gray Leaf Spot, preventative treatments may be necessary during the peak of the summer rainy season.

When using fungicides preventatively, it is important to rotate between products with different modes of action to prevent the emergence of resistant fungal strains.

Adjusting Cultural Practices to Minimize Disease Pressure

While fungicides can be a valuable tool, the most sustainable approach to managing lawn diseases is through proper cultural practices. By creating an environment that

favors turfgrass growth over fungal development, you can significantly reduce the likelihood of severe outbreaks.

Mowing Height and Frequency

Proper mowing is critical for maintaining a healthy, disease-resistant lawn. Mowing too low stresses the grass, reducing its root depth and making it more susceptible to infection. Each type of turfgrass has an optimal mowing height recommended by UF/IFAS. For example, standard St. Augustine grass should be mowed at a height of 3.5 to 4 inches, while dwarf varieties can be mowed slightly lower.

Mow frequently enough to never remove more than one-third of the leaf blade. Ensure your mower blades are sharp; dull blades tear the grass, providing an easy entry point for fungal pathogens. If you have an active disease outbreak, bag your clippings and clean your mower deck to avoid spreading the fungus.

Managing Thatch and Soil Compaction

Thatch is a layer of dead and living organic matter that accumulates between the soil surface and the green vegetation. While a small amount of thatch is beneficial, a layer thicker than half an inch can create problems. Excessive thatch acts as a sponge, retaining moisture and providing a breeding ground for fungi. It can also prevent water, air, and nutrients from reaching the root zone.

If your lawn has a thick thatch layer, dethatching or core aeration may be necessary. Aeration alleviates soil compaction and improves drainage, which reduces the time the soil stays saturated and decreases the risk of root rot diseases.

Improving Air Circulation

Fungi thrive in stagnant, humid environments. Improving air circulation across your lawn can help the grass blades dry more quickly, reducing the duration of leaf wetness. You can improve air movement by pruning low-hanging tree branches and thinning out dense shrubs that border the lawn.

In areas where air circulation is naturally poor, such as between closely spaced houses or behind solid fences, you may need to be particularly vigilant about watering practices and consider planting more disease-resistant turfgrass varieties or alternative ground covers.

Seasonal Timing for Disease Management

In Florida, lawn care is a year-round endeavor, but the specific challenges you face will change with the seasons. Understanding the seasonal patterns of disease development can help you stay one step ahead of fungal outbreaks.

Spring

Spring is a time of rapid growth for warm-season grasses as they emerge from winter dormancy. However, the mild temperatures and occasional spring showers also create favorable conditions for Large Patch and Dollar Spot. During this time, it is important to monitor your lawn closely for early signs of disease. Avoid applying heavy doses of quick-release nitrogen, as this can stimulate excessive growth and increase susceptibility.

Summer

The hot, humid, and rainy Florida summer is the prime season for Gray Leaf Spot and other foliar diseases. Frequent thunderstorms can leave the grass wet for extended periods, and high temperatures put stress on the turf. During the summer, focus on proper watering practices—watering only when necessary and always in the early morning. If you must fertilize, use slow-release products and avoid applying nitrogen during active disease outbreaks.

Fall

As temperatures begin to cool in the fall, the risk of Large Patch disease increases significantly. This is the critical time for preventative fungicide applications if your lawn has a history of this disease. It is also an important time to prepare your lawn for the winter months by ensuring it has adequate potassium, which helps improve cold tolerance and disease resistance.

Winter

While grass growth slows considerably during the winter, diseases like Large Patch can remain active if temperatures are mild and moisture is present. Continue to monitor your lawn and avoid overwatering, as the grass requires much less water during the cooler months.

When to Call a Professional

While many homeowners are capable of managing minor fungal issues on their own, there are times when it is best to enlist the help of a professional. Lawn diseases can be notoriously difficult to diagnose, and misidentification can lead to the application of the wrong treatments, wasting time and money while the disease continues to spread.

You should consider calling a professional if:

- The disease is spreading rapidly despite your efforts to control it.
- You are unsure of the correct diagnosis and want to avoid using the wrong products.
- The affected area is large, and you lack the equipment to apply treatments evenly and effectively.
- You have a recurring problem with lawn fungus year after year and need a comprehensive, long-term management plan.
- The disease has caused significant damage, and you need advice on how to repair or replace the dead turf.

Professional pest control companies have the expertise to accurately identify the specific pathogen causing the problem and access to commercial-grade fungicides. Furthermore, a professional can assess your overall lawn care routine and provide customized recommendations for watering, fertilizing, and mowing.

O’Hara Pest Control has been helping homeowners across Palm Beach, Broward, Martin, and St. Lucie counties since 1973. If you need expert help with lawn fungus or any other lawn care issues, call us at 561-655-9011 or visit oharapestcontrol.com to schedule a free consultation.