How to Control Grubs in Your Florida Lawn: A Complete Guide

If you have ever walked across your lawn and noticed that the grass feels unusually spongy, or worse, rolls up like a loose carpet, you might be dealing with a hidden enemy beneath the soil. White grubs are among the most destructive lawn pests in Florida, capable of devastating beautiful turfgrass in a matter of weeks. These voracious eaters live just beneath the surface, feasting on the root systems of your grass and leaving behind dead, yellowing patches that no amount of water or fertilizer can fix.

For homeowners in Palm Beach, Broward, Martin, and St. Lucie counties, maintaining a lush, green lawn is a point of pride, but Florida's subtropical climate, sandy soils, and year-round warmth create the perfect environment for these pests to thrive. Understanding how to identify, treat, and prevent white grub infestations is crucial for protecting your investment and keeping your yard looking its best. This comprehensive guide will walk you through everything you need to know about managing grubs in your Florida lawn, from early detection to effective treatment strategies.

Understanding White Grubs in Florida

Before you can effectively control a pest, it is important to understand exactly what you are dealing with. The term "white grub" is a generic label used to describe the larval stage of various scarab beetles. In Florida, these grubs are a common and persistent problem, feeding on the roots of all major turfgrass species, including St. Augustine, Zoysia, Bahia, and Bermuda grass.

Common Grub Species in South Florida

While all white grubs share a similar appearance—fat, whitish, C-shaped bodies with distinct legs near their heads—they actually belong to several different species of beetles. The most common culprits in South Florida include:

1. **Masked Chafers (Cyclocephala species):** The Southern masked chafer is one of the most frequent offenders in Florida lawns. The adult beetles are a light brown or tan color and do not feed on foliage, but their larvae are highly destructive to turf roots.

2. **May/June Beetles (Phyllophaga species):** As their name suggests, the adult beetles typically emerge in late spring and early summer. The larvae of these beetles, often referred to as true white grubs, can cause significant damage to lawns and pastures. There are over 100 different species of Phyllophaga, many of which are active in Florida.

3. **Sugarcane Grubs (Tomarus subtropicus):** Particularly troublesome in southern parts of the state, sugarcane grubs are larger than many other species and can cause severe damage to St. Augustine grass. They are often found in coastal areas and regions with sandy soils.

The Life Cycle of a Grub

Understanding the life cycle of these insects is key to timing your control efforts effectively. Most scarab beetles in Florida follow a similar one-year life cycle, though some species may take longer to mature.

The cycle begins when adult beetles emerge from the soil to mate and lay eggs. In Florida, this typically occurs from late spring through mid-summer. The females burrow into the soil, preferring moist, irrigated turf, and lay their eggs just below the surface.

Within a few weeks, the eggs hatch into tiny, first-instar larvae. These young grubs begin feeding immediately on organic matter and delicate grass roots. As they grow, they molt through three larval stages, known as instars. It is during the third instar—usually in late summer and early fall—that the grubs are the largest and most destructive. They consume massive amounts of root tissue, leading to the rapid decline of the turf above.

As temperatures cool slightly in the late fall and winter, the grubs may burrow deeper into the soil to overwinter, though in South Florida's mild climate, they can remain active closer to the surface year-round. In the spring, the mature grubs pupate in the soil, eventually transforming into adult beetles to start the cycle all over again.

Identifying a Grub Infestation

One of the biggest challenges in controlling white grubs is that the damage often goes unnoticed until it is severe. Because the grubs feed below ground, the initial symptoms can easily be mistaken for drought stress, disease, or nutrient deficiencies. However, there are several distinct signs that can help you identify a grub problem before it destroys your entire lawn.

The “Carpet Roll” Test

The most definitive sign of a severe grub infestation is turf that has lost its root system. Because the grubs sever the roots just below the thatch layer, the grass is no longer anchored to the soil. If you notice areas of your lawn that look yellow or dead, try pulling up on the grass. If it lifts easily from the soil, rolling back like a piece of carpet or freshly laid sod, you almost certainly have a grub problem. The soil underneath will likely be loose, and you may see the white, C-shaped grubs resting on the surface.

Spongy Turf

Even before the grass dies completely, you may notice that the ground feels unusually soft or spongy when you walk on it. This occurs because the root structure that normally gives the turf its firmness has been eaten away. If a section of your lawn feels like you are walking on a thick cushion, it is time to investigate further.

Increased Wildlife Activity

Grubs are a highly nutritious food source for many types of wildlife. If you suddenly notice an increase in animal activity on your lawn, it could be a sign that a feast is taking place just below the surface.

- **Armadillos:** These armored mammals are notorious for digging up lawns in search of grubs. They use their sharp claws and strong snouts to root through the soil, leaving behind shallow, cone-shaped holes.
- **Raccoons:** Raccoons will use their nimble paws to roll back sections of turf to get to the grubs underneath, often causing as much damage as the grubs themselves.

- **Birds:** Large flocks of birds, such as crows or ibises, repeatedly congregating on your lawn and pecking at the soil can be an early indicator of a high grub population.

Checking Grub Populations

To confirm a grub infestation and determine if treatment is necessary, you should perform a physical inspection of the soil. The University of Florida's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (UF/IFAS) recommends checking the grub population per square foot to determine if it has reached a damaging threshold.

To do this, select an area of turf that is showing early signs of yellowing or stress—do not check completely dead areas, as the grubs have likely already moved on to greener pastures. Using a shovel or a sturdy knife, cut a one-foot square into the turf, going about two to three inches deep. Pull back the flap of grass and sift through the soil and roots, counting any grubs you find.

The Threshold: Finding one or two grubs per square foot is generally not a cause for concern; a healthy lawn can easily tolerate minor feeding. However, if you find **three to five grubs (or more) per square foot**, the population has reached a level that requires intervention. Be sure to check several different areas of your lawn to get an accurate assessment of the infestation.

How to Treat and Control Grubs

When it comes to controlling white grubs in your Florida lawn, timing is everything. The products and methods you use will depend entirely on the life stage of the grubs and the time of year. There are two primary approaches to chemical grub control: preventative treatments and curative treatments.

Preventative Treatments

Preventative insecticides are the most effective and reliable way to manage white grubs. These products are designed to kill the newly hatched, first-instar larvae before they have a chance to cause significant damage to your lawn. Because these chemicals take time to move into the soil and be absorbed by the grass roots, they must be applied *before* the grubs are present or while they are still very small.

Timing: In South Florida, the optimal time to apply preventative grub control is in **early summer**, typically late May through June. This timing ensures that the active ingredients are present in the soil when the adult beetles are laying eggs and the young grubs are hatching.

Active Ingredients: Look for products containing systemic active ingredients such as chlorantraniliprole or imidacloprid. These chemicals are absorbed by the grass roots; when the young grubs feed on the roots, they ingest the insecticide and die.

Application: Preventative products are usually applied as granules. It is critical to water the product in thoroughly immediately after application—typically with at least half an inch of water. This moves the chemical past the thatch layer and down into the root zone where the grubs will be feeding. Always follow the manufacturer's instructions regarding application rates and watering requirements.

Curative Treatments

If you missed the window for preventative treatment and are now facing a full-blown infestation in late summer or fall, you will need to use a curative insecticide. These products are fast-acting and are designed to kill larger, mature grubs on contact.

Timing: Curative treatments should be applied as soon as damage is noticed and a high grub population is confirmed, usually from late August through October.

Active Ingredients: Look for products containing fast-acting ingredients like trichlorfon or carbaryl. Unlike preventative treatments, these chemicals are not systemic and do not provide long-lasting protection. They break down quickly in the environment, so they must be applied exactly when the grubs are actively feeding near the surface.

Application: Like preventative treatments, curative products must be watered in heavily to be effective. If your lawn has a thick layer of thatch (more than half an inch), you may need to dethatch or aerate before applying the insecticide to ensure the chemical can reach the soil. It is also recommended to mow the lawn prior to application.

Practical DIY Steps and Cultural Practices

While chemical treatments are often necessary to control severe infestations, maintaining a healthy lawn through proper cultural practices is your first line of

defense. A vigorous, well-maintained lawn can tolerate minor grub feeding without showing visible damage and is less attractive to egg-laying beetles.

1. **Water Deeply and Infrequently:** Moist soil is critical for grub eggs to hatch and survive. Over-irrigating your lawn, especially during the summer rainy season, can actually attract adult beetles looking for a place to lay their eggs. Follow local water restrictions and aim to water your lawn deeply but infrequently, allowing the top inch of soil to dry out between waterings.
2. **Mow at the Proper Height:** Keep your grass mowed at the highest recommended setting for your specific turf type (e.g., 3.5 to 4 inches for St. Augustine grass). Taller grass promotes deeper, more robust root systems that are better equipped to withstand grub damage.
3. **Manage Thatch:** Thatch is the layer of dead and living organic matter that accumulates between the green vegetation and the soil surface. A thick thatch layer provides a perfect habitat for pests and can prevent insecticides and water from reaching the soil. If your thatch is more than half an inch thick, consider dethatching or core aeration.
4. **Proper Fertilization:** Apply fertilizer according to UF/IFAS recommendations for your grass type and region. Avoid excessive nitrogen applications, which can lead to rapid, weak growth that is highly susceptible to pest damage.

Repairing Grub-Damaged Turf

Once you have successfully eliminated the grubs, you will likely be left with patches of dead or damaged grass. The good news is that Florida's warm climate allows for relatively quick recovery, provided you take the right steps.

1. **Rake and Remove Dead Grass:** Use a sturdy rake to clear away the dead, loose turf from the affected areas. This exposes the soil and prepares it for new growth.
2. **Water and Fertilize:** If the damage is mild and some roots remain, the grass may recover on its own with proper care. Ensure the area receives adequate water and apply a light, balanced fertilizer to encourage new root growth.
3. **Reseed or Resod:** For large, completely bare areas, you will need to replace the grass. Depending on your turf type, you can patch the area with new sod, plugs, or seed. Be sure to keep the newly planted grass well-watered until it is established.

When to Call a Professional

While many homeowners can successfully manage minor grub issues on their own, there are times when it is best to call in a professional pest control service. You should consider hiring an expert if:

- **The Infestation is Severe:** If large portions of your lawn are dying and the grub population is well above the threshold of 3-5 per square foot, professional-grade treatments may be necessary to save the turf.
- **You Have Recurring Problems:** If you find yourself battling grubs year after year despite your best efforts, a professional can help identify underlying issues with your lawn care routine and implement a long-term prevention strategy.
- **You Are Unsure of the Pest:** Because grub damage can mimic other lawn problems like chinch bugs, fungus, or drought, misdiagnosis is common. A professional can accurately identify the pest and recommend the appropriate treatment, saving you time and money on ineffective products.
- **You Prefer a Hands-Off Approach:** Applying lawn chemicals requires precision, proper equipment, and adherence to safety guidelines. If you are uncomfortable handling insecticides or simply do not have the time, a professional service can handle the job safely and effectively.

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 controlling grubs or any other lawn pests, call us at 561-655-9011 or visit oharapestcontrol.com to schedule a free consultation.