

# How to Care for Bahia Grass in Florida

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Florida homeowners know that cultivating a lush, resilient lawn in the Sunshine State is no small feat. With our unique combination of intense heat, high humidity, sandy soils, and torrential summer downpours, choosing the right turfgrass is half the battle. Bahiagrass (*Paspalum notatum*) has long been a staple in South Florida landscapes, prized for its rugged durability and low-maintenance requirements. Originally introduced from Brazil in 1914 as a pasture grass, Bahia has adapted remarkably well to the sandy soils of Palm Beach, Broward, Martin, and St. Lucie counties.

For those seeking a lawn that can survive our subtropical climate without the need for constant coddling, Bahia grass is an excellent choice. However, while it is often touted as “low maintenance,” it is certainly not “no maintenance.” Understanding the specific needs of this tough turfgrass—from its unique mowing requirements to its susceptibility to certain pests and nutrient deficiencies—is essential for keeping your yard looking its best. This comprehensive guide will explore the benefits and drawbacks of Bahia grass, popular varieties suited for Florida, and the essential care strategies you need to maintain a healthy, vibrant lawn.

## The Benefits and Drawbacks of Bahia Grass

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Before committing to a Bahia grass lawn, or if you have inherited one and want to understand it better, it is important to weigh its pros and cons. Bahia grass is uniquely suited to Florida’s challenging environment, but its characteristics may not appeal to everyone.

### The Benefits of Bahia Grass

The most significant advantage of Bahia grass is its exceptional drought tolerance. Thanks to its deep, extensive root system, Bahia can reach moisture deep within the sandy soil, allowing it to survive extended dry spells that would decimate other turf types. During severe droughts, Bahia grass will enter a state of dormancy, turning brown to conserve energy. However, it possesses a remarkable ability to bounce back and green up rapidly once the rains return or irrigation is applied.

Another major benefit is its low fertility requirement. Bahia grass thrives in infertile, acidic soils where other grasses struggle. It requires significantly less fertilizer than varieties like St. Augustine or Zoysia, making it a more environmentally friendly and cost-effective option. This lower nutrient requirement also means it is less prone to the thatch buildup that plagues other turfgrasses.

Furthermore, Bahia grass exhibits excellent resistance to many common lawn diseases and nematodes. Its tough nature makes it less susceptible to the fungal issues that often arise during Florida's humid rainy season, reducing the need for chemical interventions.

## **The Drawbacks of Bahia Grass**

Despite its hardiness, Bahia grass does have some notable drawbacks. The most common complaint from homeowners is its coarse texture and open growth habit. Bahia does not form the dense, carpet-like sward characteristic of St. Augustine grass. Instead, it grows somewhat sparsely, which can leave open areas susceptible to weed invasion if the turf is not kept healthy.

Additionally, Bahia grass is notorious for its rapid and prolific seed head production. During the long days of summer, Bahia produces tall, Y-shaped seed heads that can shoot up just days after mowing. This rapid growth necessitates frequent mowing to keep the lawn looking neat, which can offset some of its "low maintenance" appeal.

Finally, Bahia grass is highly susceptible to yellowing caused by iron deficiency, particularly in soils with a high pH. It also faces a significant threat from mole crickets, a destructive pest that can quickly devastate a Bahia lawn if left unchecked.

## **Popular Bahia Grass Varieties for Florida**

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Not all Bahia grass is created equal. Over the years, several varieties have been developed or selected for use in Florida lawns. The two most common cultivars found in residential landscapes are Argentine and Pensacola.

### **Argentine Bahia Grass**

Argentine Bahia is generally considered the premier choice for home lawns in Florida. It forms a relatively dense sod compared to other varieties and boasts a darker green

color. Its leaf blades are wider, giving it a slightly more attractive appearance. Argentine Bahia also has excellent resistance to insects and diseases.

One of the key advantages of Argentine Bahia is its seed head production. While it still produces seed heads, they are generally shorter and less dense than those of Pensacola Bahia. Furthermore, Argentine Bahia reproduces through apomixis, meaning its seeds are genetically identical to the parent plant. This results in a highly uniform turfgrass area when established from seed. The main drawback of Argentine Bahia is that it has a shorter growing season and may lose its color earlier in the cooler months compared to Pensacola.

## **Pensacola Bahia Grass**

Pensacola Bahia is the most widely grown variety, primarily used for pastures and roadsides, but it is also found in many home lawns. It features an incredibly extensive root system, which gives it superior stress tolerance and allows it to withstand both extreme heat and cold better than Argentine Bahia. It tends to hold its green color longer into the winter months.

However, Pensacola Bahia has longer, narrower leaf blades and produces an abundance of tall seed heads, which makes it less desirable for those seeking a highly manicured lawn. Because Pensacola reproduces through sexual recombination, its seedlings can vary in appearance, leading to a less uniform stand of grass.

## **Essential Care Strategies for Bahia Grass**

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While Bahia grass is resilient, proper cultural practices are necessary to maintain its health and appearance. By following University of Florida's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (UF/IFAS) recommendations, you can ensure your lawn thrives in our unique climate.

### **Mowing: Managing the Seed Heads**

Mowing is perhaps the most critical, and sometimes the most frustrating, aspect of Bahia grass care. During the active growing season in the summer, Bahia grass should be mowed every 7 to 14 days. The recommended mowing height is 3 to 4 inches. Maintaining this higher height encourages a deeper root system, which is vital for the grass's drought tolerance and overall stress resistance.

The rapid production of tough, fibrous seed heads often dictates the mowing schedule. These seed head stems are incredibly strong and can quickly dull mower blades. It is absolutely essential to use a heavy-duty rotary mower and to sharpen the blades regularly. A dull blade will tear the grass rather than cutting it cleanly, leaving ragged edges that turn brown and make the lawn susceptible to disease.

When mowing, never remove more than one-third of the leaf blade at a time. If the grass has grown to 4.5 inches, it should be mowed down to 3 inches. Additionally, always leave the grass clippings on the lawn. They decompose quickly, returning valuable nutrients to the soil without contributing to thatch buildup.

## Minimal Fertilization and Irrigation Needs

Bahia grass is the quintessential “lean and mean” turfgrass. Over-fertilizing and over-watering are common mistakes that can actually harm the grass and encourage weed growth.

**Fertilization:** Bahia grass requires very little nitrogen. According to UF/IFAS guidelines, Bahia lawns in South Florida generally need only 1 to 2 pounds of nitrogen per 1,000 square feet annually. This should be applied in one to three applications from spring through fall. It is crucial to adhere to local fertilizer ordinances, particularly summer blackout periods designed to protect our waterways from nutrient runoff. When applying fertilizer, use a product with controlled-release nitrogen and avoid “weed-and-feed” products containing atrazine or metsulfuron, as these chemicals will severely damage or kill Bahia grass.

**Irrigation:** The best approach to watering an established Bahia lawn is to irrigate only on an “as-needed” basis. Wait until the grass shows signs of drought stress—such as leaf blades folding in half, turning a blue-gray color, or footprints remaining visible long after walking across the lawn. When these signs appear, apply  $\frac{1}{2}$  to  $\frac{3}{4}$  inch of water to deeply penetrate the root zone.

During extended droughts, if you do not have an irrigation system, it is perfectly acceptable to let the Bahia grass go dormant. It will turn brown but will recover once rainfall resumes. Overwatering Bahia grass weakens its deep root system, making it less resilient and more prone to weed infestations. Always comply with South Florida Water Management District watering restrictions.

## **Addressing Iron Deficiency and Yellowing**

One of the most common aesthetic issues with Bahia grass is yellowing, technically known as chlorosis. While yellowing can sometimes indicate a nitrogen deficiency, in Bahia grass, it is most frequently caused by a lack of available iron.

Bahia grass prefers acidic soils with a pH below 7.0. In South Florida, where our soils often have a high pH due to underlying limestone or the use of alkaline irrigation water, the grass roots cannot properly absorb iron, even if it is present in the soil. This results in the characteristic yellowing of the leaf blades.

To correct iron deficiency, do not simply apply more nitrogen fertilizer, as this will not solve the problem and can promote excessive, weak growth. Instead, apply a soluble iron source. Ferrous sulfate (applied at a rate of 2 ounces in 3 to 5 gallons of water per 1,000 square feet) or chelated iron products are effective. These can be applied as a foliar spray every six weeks during the growing season to temporarily restore the dark green color without stimulating rapid top growth. Keep in mind that granular iron products are generally ineffective in high-pH Florida soils.

## **Controlling Mole Crickets in Bahia Lawns**

While Bahia grass is relatively resistant to most pests, it has one major nemesis: the mole cricket. These destructive insects tunnel through the soil just below the surface, severing the grass roots and causing the turf to wilt and die rapidly. The damage often appears as loose, uprooted soil and thinning patches of brown grass.

Mole crickets are most active in the spring and early summer. If you suspect an infestation, you can perform a simple soap flush test. Mix 1 to 2 ounces of lemon-scented liquid dish soap in 2 gallons of water and pour it over a 2-square-foot area of suspected damage. If mole crickets are present, the soapy water will irritate them, and they will surface within a few minutes.

Controlling mole crickets requires precise timing. Treatment is most effective in early summer when the nymphs are small and actively feeding near the surface. Bait-type insecticides are often the most successful DIY approach, but the specific products available frequently change. Maintaining a healthy, deeply rooted lawn through proper mowing and watering is your first line of defense, as stressed grass is more susceptible to damage.

# Practical DIY Steps for Homeowners

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Before reaching for the phone, there are several proactive steps you can take to keep your Bahia lawn in top shape:

1. **Sharpen Your Mower Blades:** Make it a habit to sharpen your mower blades every 4 to 6 weeks during the peak growing season. This single action will dramatically improve the look and health of your lawn.
2. **Conduct a Soap Flush Test:** If you notice sudden wilting or spongy soil, perform the soapy water test described above to check for mole crickets early.
3. **Calibrate Your Sprinklers:** Place empty tuna cans around your yard and run your irrigation system to measure how long it takes to apply  $\frac{1}{2}$  to  $\frac{3}{4}$  inch of water. This ensures you are watering deeply but not overwatering.
4. **Apply Iron Foliar Sprays:** If your lawn turns yellow but is otherwise healthy, try a liquid iron application before resorting to nitrogen fertilizers.
5. **Hand-Pull Weeds:** Because Bahia has an open growth habit, weeds will occasionally sprout. Hand-pulling them early prevents them from going to seed and taking over.

## When to Call a Professional

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While Bahia grass is designed for the DIY homeowner, certain situations require professional intervention. You should call a pest control and lawn care expert when:

- **Mole Cricket Infestations are Severe:** If your soap flush reveals a high number of mole crickets, or if the damage is spreading rapidly despite your DIY efforts, professional-grade treatments are necessary. Timing and product selection are critical for eradication.
- **Persistent Weed Problems:** Because Bahia grass is sensitive to many common herbicides (like atrazine), treating severe weed infestations without damaging the turf requires specialized knowledge and selective chemicals.
- **Unexplained Turf Decline:** If your lawn is browning or thinning and you have ruled out drought, iron deficiency, and mole crickets, a professional can diagnose underlying soil issues, fungal diseases, or nematode problems.

- **Large-Scale Sod Replacement:** Establishing a new Bahia lawn from sod can be labor-intensive, and ensuring the sod is free of invasive pasture weeds requires a professional eye.

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 Bahia grass care, pest management, or any other lawn concerns, call us at 561-655-9011 or visit [oharapestcontrol.com](http://oharapestcontrol.com) to schedule a free consultation.