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Pasture Insect Pests You Need to Know

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The weather is warming up and the cycle of pasture insect pests will soon resume. We need to watch and protect our pasture against major insect damage. The most common pasture insect pests in south Florida are the chinch bugs, spittle bugs, caterpillars, and mole crickets.

Mole crickets have just awoken from their dormant winter sleep. They are feeding and flying around bahiagrass pastures to mate and breed. These mature mole crickets will lay millions of eggs in underground chambers between March and May before they die out about the end of June. They will be survived by the millions of nymphs that hatch from eggs in May and June unless we act together to control the adults now. The UF-IFAS, the Florida Department of Agriculture, the Florida Cattlemen's Association, and the Florida Turfgrass Association established a partnership in 2002 for the commercial production of the mole cricket biological control product Nematac® S by Becker Underwood. This spring's nematode product is marketed from mid-February to May. The team also established a commercial strip-application by Ingram Grove Services and a network of nematode vendors throughout Florida. Sales information on nematodes can be obtained from your local vendor, but technical information on proper application methods can be obtained from your local Ag. Extension Office.

Southern chinch bugs are most abundant in dry years and prefer thin stands of grass. The adult chinch bug has a black body and white wing covers, each with a black triangle at the middle of its outer margin. Nymphs are reddish with a white band across their backs, and older and larger nymphs are reddish-brown with a white band. If you observe the appearance of black-white-red ants on the thatch of your damaged bermudagrass pasture, it is most likely caused by chinch bugs. Chinch bugs overwinter as adults and large nymphs in thatch of infested fields. Activity resumes in spring when temperatures exceed

65 oF. The bugs suck plant juices from grass resulting in yellowish to brownish patches usually beginning with the driest part along the edges of the field. The damage expands to new areas as the bugs migrate. Control measures include monitoring for the insect, close mowing (3") and spraying the affected area plus a 5-ft buffer with recommended chemicals.

Adult two-lined spittlebugs are black with red eyes and legs and have two orange transverse stripes across their wings. The nymphs are yellow or white with a brown head and are enveloped in a mass of white frothy spittle that they secrete for protection. The majority of the spittle masses are not readily visible since they are located near the soil surface at the base of the thatch. Damage to grass is caused by adults and nymphs piercing and sucking juices from the plant. The insect also injects toxic salivary substances into the plants. Infected grasses wilt and tips turn yellow and eventually brown. Limpograss, pangolagrass and Rhodesgrass are very susceptible especially under high humidity conditions. Close mowing or grazing in summer will reduce the dense thatch mat and the spittlebug problem. Burning off the dense mat of dry grass in late-February or early March is an alternative control measure. The protective spittle makes biological control of this pest very difficult.

Caterpillars or worms are the immature stages of grayish-brown moths. These are migratory pests that often move in large numbers from one area to another in search of food. They can cause extensive defoliation of N-fertilized foliage and prefer N-demanding grasses such as bermudagrass, stargrass and pangolagrass. We will discuss the details of the problem with armyworms and loopers and their control in the summer as their season approaches.