



Cover Crops

How to Plant and Care for a Cover Crop:

1. All cover crops are not created equal. Choose a cover crop that fits your vegetable planting schedule, gardening goals, and garden site. Seasonal timing is very important to determine the type of plant (s) to select. See the chart on the back page for more info.
2. Cover crops are best sown in late August through September. Sow the seed after removing early harvested crops or plant between rows of late growing or fall planted crops.
3. Prepare a seed bed by lightly tilling or raking the soil.
4. Broadcast the seed at the recommended rates and gently rake in. Water.
5. In the spring, till in the dead plant material of winter kill cover crops or plant right into the debris. If the cover is still growing, mow first and till in the crop. Mow or till before a seed head develops.
6. Wait 2-3 weeks before planting spring crops!

Choosing a Cover Crop

Cover crops are very beneficial for your garden but they have characteristics that must be reviewed to select the best for your situation. Annual cover crops that die off during the winter (aka "winter kill") are the easiest to manage. These crops die off during the cold winter and most of the green matter decomposes away by the time you plant a spring garden.

Cover crops that over winter (don't die off in winter) will provide more benefit with their longer growing period and greater root growth however, they must be killed in the spring. Herbicides, tillage and plastic covering can be used to kill the plant 3 weeks before planting begins.

Some brassica crops (radish, rapeseed, turnip) have strong tap roots (~1 1/4 inch in size) that combat compaction and provide a root channel for future crops. Legumes are attractive for their nitrogen fixing especially for those who practice organic gardening.

See the chart on the back page for help selecting the best cover crop for your garden.

What are Cover Crops?

Cover crops are close-growing crops planted either in rotation with food crops or between food crops to enrich and protect soil.

Why Plant Cover Crops?

Soil does not need to rest! Pioneers "wore out" the soil by harvesting the crop and returning little to the soil. Farmers now use cover crops to improve soil nutrients, prevent erosion, and more. Cover crops are well suited to gardens of all sizes.

Benefits of Cover Crops

- Cover crops **limit erosion** by forming a protective mat over the soil during the fall and winter months. They **protect the soil** from erosion from wind, rain, and melting snow.
- Foot traffic, tillers, and hard rains can all compact the soil. Cover crops can **loosen the soil** and create passages for roots to grow downward and water to soak into the soil. **Cover crops are natural soil aerators!**
- Cover Crops **add nutrients back to the soil**— they are natural and organic fertilizers! Some even fix nitrogen!
- Cover crops will **shade and cover weeds** in the fall and early spring.
- Cover crops **attract desirable insects** like bees & ladybugs and promote beneficial soil critters.



This cover crop is a mixture of winter peas and oilseed radish.



Oats winter kill, making them a great option for organic gardens.

Cover Crops— What & When to Plant

Types	End Planting Date	Over Winter	Growth	Attributes	Planting Rate / 1000 sq ft
Grasses					
Annual Ryegrass	9/15	Yes	Fast	NS SB	0.5 to 2 lbs
Barley	10/15	Yes	Med-fast	NS SB WF	2-3 lbs
Oats	9/15	No	Fast	NS SB WF	2 lbs
Buckwheat	8/20	No	Fast	WF	3 lbs
Winter Wheat	10/25	Yes	Med-slow	NS WF SB	2-3 lbs
Cereal Rye	11/1	Yes	Fast	NS WF SB	2-3 lbs
Legumes					
Field/Winter Pea	9/15	No	Med	NB	2-4 lbs
Harry Vetch	9/15	Yes	Slow	NB SB WF	1-2 lbs
Brassicac					
Oilseed Radish	9/10	No	Med- fast	NS SB WF	0.25 lbs
Forage Turnip	8/20	No	Med-fast	NB WF	0.25 lbs

Legend for Attributes

NS– Nitrogen Scavenger SB– Soil Builder WF– Weed Fighter NB– Nitrogen Builder

Contact the SWCD for more info on where to obtain cover crop seed.



Crimson Clover cover crop
Photo courtesy <http://pender.ces.ncsu.edu>

Note– Mixing two or more of these crops may yield greater benefits than one alone.

Common mixes are:

50% Harry Vetch and 50% Winter Cereal Rye

50% Winter Pea and 50% Oil Seed Radish

60% Oats and 40% Oil Seed Radish

Contact the Hamilton County Soil and Water
Conservation District for more information and
info on cover crop seed providers:

1717 Pleasant St.

Noblesville, IN 46060

317.773.2181

www.hamiltonswcd.org

