

Cover Crops

Cover crops are an ideal way to improve soil quality and fertility while your vegetable garden rests for the winter. Also known as green manures, these crops are tilled back into the soil in late winter prior to spring planting. They can be useful as an interim cover for any bare spots where you want to temporarily keep planted for weed control and to control soil erosion. The key is to cut down and till under whatever crop you use before it goes to seed.

How:

For winter cover crops, plant seeds in fall about three to four weeks prior to frost, starting around mid-September in our area. Planting is generally successful thru the end of October; the longer you wait to plant the poorer the germination rate will be depending on the weather. You can use a broadcast spreader or spread the seeds should be in firm contact with the soil and lightly covered or raked into the soil. Birds can eat exposed seeds if they are not covered. Keep the soil evenly moist to germinate, and then your work is basically done. The plants will overwinter and resume more rapid growth when the weather warms in late winter.

Cover crops should be tilled under prior to going to seed. Most crops will bloom about 90 days after germinating. Depending on when you planted your crop, by late January to mid-February you can mow down or till the cover crop right into the existing soil.

Why:

Cover crops add nitrogen and organic matter to the soil, loosening compacted soils, suppress weed growth and reduce soil erosion.

Cover crops such as vetch, faba beans, and clover are legumes. These legumes play host to nitrogen fixing bacteria in their root systems, which convert nitrogen from the air into a form that is usable by plants.

A thick growth of cover crop competes well with weeds over the winter. If the cover crop is mowed down and used as a mulch layer, the mulch layer can help prevent seeds from germinating due to light reduction and acting as a physical barrier. In addition to this, some crops such as rye, vetch, and clover can inhibit the germination of weed seeds as they degrade in the soil.

Common Cover Crops and Seeding Rates:

Common vetch: best for well-drained soils, not tolerant of wet soils. 1 lb per 400 sq ft.

Crimson clover: grows well on sandy and clay soils, not wet soils. 1 lb per 1000 sq ft.

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