

Cover Crops

Also known as green manure, cover crops are a great way to improve soil quality and suppress weeds while your vegetable garden rests for the winter. It is an easy method to increase soil fertility, tilth, control erosion, soil compaction and suppress weeds. Use cover crops in a fallow vegetable garden or any place where the soil would otherwise be left bare. Weed seeds will quickly make a home anywhere soil is left uncovered. Practice your gardening ABCs, which stands for 'always be covered', and your soil with its network of beneficial organisms will thrive.

Successful cover cropping is easy to do, but it does require a little advanced planning: selecting the right variety for your needs, planting and terminating at the right time. When you are planning your vegetable crop rotation schedule, you might want to consider planting a cover crop as one of the rotations instead of leaving it fallow.

HOW: For winter cover crops, plant seeds in the Fall, about three to four weeks prior to frost. Successful germination depends on the temperature being at least 45°F at time of planting.

Rake the area you wish to plant and scatter seeds by hand or use a broadcast spreader. The seeds should have firm contact with the soil and be covered very lightly with sand or soil to reduce predation by hungry birds. Keep the soil evenly moist until the seeds germinate. Now your work is done until Spring. The plants will overwinter and resume active growth when the weather warms again. Most crops will bloom about 90 days after germinating.

After flowering and before they go to seed, cover crops should be chopped down with a sickle, hoe or mower. Plants can be tilled into the soil or can be left on the ground to decompose in place. This practice, called "chop and drop", is a 'no-till' method of cutting down the cover crop and leaving the plant material on the soil surface to decompose without turning it under the soil. The no-till method minimizes soil disturbance, creates mulch which feeds the soil and suppresses weeds and releases nutrients back into the soil.

COMMON COVER CROPS AND SEEDING RATES:

Hairy Vetch (*Vicia villosa*): Best for well-drained soils, not tolerant of wet soils.

1-2 pounds per 1000 sq. ft.

Crimson Clover (*Trifolium incarnatum*): An annual nitrogen fixer, grows well on sandy and clay soils, but not wet soils. 1 pound per 3000 sq. ft. (Not to be confused with Red Clover, *Trifolium pratense*, which is a perennial.)

Fava Beans (*Vicia faba*) Good for clay soils. 3-4 pounds per 1000 sq. ft.

Cereal Rye (*Secale cereale*): Fastest to germinate and grow. 1 pound per 250 sq. ft.

Austrian winter pea (*Pisum arvense*): Efficient supplier of nitrogen to the soil. 2-4 pounds per 1,000 sq.ft.

