

## Consider Cover Crops

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Just as the name implies, cover crops are planted to cover, protect and benefit the soil over the winter months. Farmers have been utilizing cover crops for centuries, so why not put the practice to work in your own backyard garden?

One of the most important benefits of planting a cover crop is improved soil quality. Cover crops help the soil cycle nutrients more effectively and increase its water holding capability. This results in more resilient soil and an increase in your garden's yield for next season.

Whenever a plant establishes roots and grows into compacted areas, the surface of the soil is protected from sealing off, which can happen if a field lays fallow for a period of time. In addition, beneficial organisms in the soil such as earthworms thrive when fresh plant material is decomposing, thereby improving organic matter of the soil.

Cover crops also reduce wind and water erosion and help suppress weeds and growth of other plants by soil shading. Beneficial insects such as lady beetles or ground beetles may be encouraged by cover crops.

Mid- August is the time to start planning what cover crop you want to plant in your garden. Selection depends on when it can be planted and the goal for its use. Legumes such as clovers, hairy vetch, field peas, alfalfa and soybeans, can add substantial amounts of nitrogen to the soil. Non-legumes, such as rye, oats, wheat and buckwheat, recycle existing soil nitrogen and other nutrients and can reduce leaching losses. A combination of two or more types may be beneficial for quick establishment and improved nutrient utilization.

The ideal time to actually plant is about four weeks prior to the anticipated killing frost. The plants need to be established before the fall chill appears.

Since it only needs about three to four weeks to develop, rye can be planted in late October. Oats and wheat should be planted in October as well. These annuals are easy to turn into the soil once spring arrives. Clover, which features a large red flower, can be planted through September. One drawback of clover, though, is that it's a perennial and must be killed off before spring planting can begin. Field peas are a good choice and can be planted in late August or early September. Pairing the peas with oat seeds give the peas something to lean on, as the oats can act like a trellis.

To plant your cover crops, the soil needs to be broken up. The seed bed should be approximately 6 inches deep to help establish a healthy root system. For small seeds like rye grass and buckwheat, you can simply broadcast the seeds into the soil and cover lightly. Large seeds like peas, hairy vetch and wheat need to be planted in shallow, closely spaced furrows. If your garden is still full of your precious fall vegetables at the time of planting your cover crop, plant the seeds between the rows of your current

plants and water enough to keep the soil moist for germination. Sow 2-4 ounces of seed per 100 square foot of garden.

Once planted, the cover crop does not need any maintenance during the winter. Allow them to grow as long as possible in the spring to add additional nutrients to the soil and suppress weeds, but keep in mind that they can also use up soil moisture if dry conditions exist.

When spring arrives, you will need to till your cover crop and work the vegetation into the soil, adding not only nutrients, but a nice mulch to the garden for your next planting season.