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Gardeners work hard and get tired. Your soil works hard, and it gets tired, too. Okay, not in the same way, but soils can become depleted from the very elements we depend on them for delivering strong, healthy plants. Cover crops are an easy solution to revive and regenerate soils that have been overworked. The word “crop” might scare some people into thinking that such plants are for farmers and large agriculture acreage, but any home landscape can benefit from planting cover crops, especially vegetable beds.

What is a cover crop?

A cover crop, or “green manure”, is a nitrogen-rich plant that is grown specifically to be chopped up and left in the soil. It is not something you harvest for food as it decomposes.

What are the benefits to planting a cover crop?

- Improve soil structure, air and water retention.
- Add nutrients to the soil.
- Protect the soil from erosion and the heat of the sun.
- Suppress weeds and some soil-borne pathogens such as nematodes.
- They can be used between vegetable bed rows to act as a living mulch.
- They're a good option for those who choose organic gardening practices.
- Their flowers can attract “good bugs” such as pollinators and those that help control “bad bugs”.

What kinds of plants are used as cover crops and when do I plant them?

You can plant a cover crop when the bed has finished producing for the growing season to hold it before the next planting season, when you'd like to give a bed a rest from growing regular plants, when you want to regenerate the soil to give it a better structure. You can choose winter (plant October 1- November 15) or summer (plant March 1 – June 30) varieties.

Some good ones to try are Clover (shown right, photo: Creative Commons), Cowpeas, Vetch and Rye Grass.



How to plant cover crops:

Clear your chosen area of any previous plant residue.

Dig up the area at least three weeks before planting your cover crop, then smooth the surface when it's time to plant.

Sow seeds over the entire bed, and then cover with soil and water well. A good rule is to plant the seeds as deep as the seed is wide.

If you want to use the cover crop as a living mulch between rows, plant your main plants first, then plant the cover crop seeds in between the rows, keeping distance of a few inches between the main plants and the cover crop.

Make sure to keep the soil moist so seeds germinate. Once plants emerge, water as needed, such as when the plants look wilted.

Now what?

Keep your cover crop well-watered, and wait until it reaches peak growth, usually when you start to see any flower buds. Leave a few plants with flowers for those beneficial insects, and then you can chop up and dig the rest into the soil.

You'll need to give the chopped and dug-in material some time to decompose, so plan ahead, usually several weeks, before your bed is ready to be prepared for planting regular plants.

However you choose to use cover crops, they will improve your soil quality in so many ways that it will have been worth the effort. Happy digging!



FIGURE 1. CREDITS: CREATIVE COMMONS

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