

Cover Crops

Once autumn arrives it's time to start planning for next year's planting season. If the vegetables have grown well this year and produced a great crop then we need to give our gardens a little care so they can sustain this for years to come. Our soil is the source of nutrients and needs time to rest and replenish over the autumn and winter season.

THE BENEFITS

Maybe you already know about the benefits of cover crops but think they're just for farmers and other large-scale growers. Think again. Cover crops work for all gardens, big or small. They provide the garden a natural healthy soil boost, add nitrogen back into the soil, and help prevent erosion during the wet season. In the spring when they are tilled into the soil, the cover crops become food for worms. This in turn provides the soil natural aeration from their tunnelling and nutrition from their castings. Cover crops just might be the hardest-working plants you'll ever grow.

Also called green manure, they suppress weeds, build nutritious soil, and help control pests and diseases. Plus, cover crops are easy to plant and require only minimal care to thrive.

THE RIGHT CROP FOR YOUR GARDEN

If you've never used a cover crop before then a legume and rye mix is best. Legumes fix nitrogen, so will replace soil nitrogen used by last year's crop. Rye is easy to grow and excellent at preserving the soil structure.

If you've already been using cover crops or regularly use manure in the vegetable garden, then winter rye is your best choice. Since you mostly likely have excellent soil nutrition a legume is not necessary. Winter rye will preserve the nutrients you already have in the soil and will prevent run off and erosion.

HOW TO USE A COVER CROP

Using a shovel or rake gently till up the soil in the area you need to rejuvenate, like where you grew veggies last year and plan to grow again next year. Try to make sure the ground is flat and ready for seeding. Evenly spread the cover crop seeds over the soil surface. Be careful how much seed you apply, overcrowding leads to competition for water and space, which leads to slower growth. Using a rake again, go over the top of the soil to gently incorporate the seeds. Water well, especially if it's a dry day.

Then sit back and watch the crop grow, watering when needed, until the plants have grown but not yet reached the flowering stage. This happens in early spring, depending on your local climate. Once this happens, use a shove and work the entire crop into the soil, making sure the greens to become fully covered. The green leaves will now break down resulting in a nutrient rich soil. Let the soil rest for about three weeks after you turn the cover crop in, this gives everything time to break down before you plant.