

Time to plant Cover Crops in your garden

by Claudia Steen

What are cover crops and why would I want to use them in my home garden?

We all know that the foundation of a great garden is healthy, nutrient-rich soil. There are many ways to improve the productivity of your garden's soil but planting a cover crop in the fall can give you a jump start on spring gardening. Cover crops can add much needed organic matter and nutrients to your soil in lieu of using fertilizers.

Cover crops provide many side benefits including capturing nutrients that would be lost during the winter, reducing runoff and soil erosion, suppressing weeds, and supplying nitrogen (legumes only). Unfortunately, there is no single cover crop that provides all these benefits, but you can plant several varieties together in the same garden.



Agricultural Mustard

There are several varieties of cover crops that are available for the home gardener's use. Varieties suited for the Yakima Valley include cereal rye, spring barley, winter triticale and winter wheat. Legume (nitrogen fixing) varieties include Austrian winter pea, common vetch, crimson clover, and hairy vetch. Agricultural Mustard and Buckwheat are two other possibilities.

How and where do I use cover crops in my flower or vegetable garden?

Cover crops can be used in either vegetable or flower gardens. They can be planted between rows of harvested corn or in open areas of your flower garden, and wherever else you think would be a suitable spot. The key to success is to plant the cover crop in an area that won't be disturbed until the cover crop is fully grown and tilled under next spring. For instance, in a vegetable garden you may have multiple varieties of vegetables produced and harvested at different times. Start planting your cover crops first for those vegetables harvested earliest in the season. You could use cover crops such as spring barley, cereal rye, common vetch, crimson clover, or hairy vetch.



Common Vetch

For those vegetables that are harvested later, just simply add in your cover crop as you go. You may choose to use cover crops such as, cereal rye, crimson clover, common vetch, winter triticale, winter wheat, or Austrian winter pea.

Cover crops require very little maintenance and minimal water, especially during a wet fall and winter. Some cover crops can be planted as early as September and others can be planted well into the fall. Be sure to till cover crops under before they go to seed in the spring.

How do I retain nutrients in the soil once I have built them up with winter cover crops?

Something to ponder over the fall and winter is irrigation practices. They greatly affect retention of nutrients in the soil. Excess watering not only establishes conditions favorable to growing mold and bacteria, but leaches nutrients beyond the root zone of plants before they can be used. Begin in the spring by only adding the amount of water needed by your plants. Check your soil's moisture by digging a test hole below the depth of your plant's root zone with a shovel to see the depth of water penetration in your soil. Closely monitor soil moisture depths as you apply water and be sure to only maintain moisture in the plants root zone. This is an easy way to conserve both nutrients and water. One word of caution - plant health and productivity will be compromised if the soil is allowed to dry out too much, resulting in immediate wilting of the plant. Applying the appropriate amount of water will allow you to reap the benefits of the cover crops sown in the fall; you don't want your efforts to go to waste!

Happy fall gardening!