



URBAN GARDEN COVER CROP INFORMATION

A cover crop is grown for the purpose of being tilled back into the soil in spring. A cover crop can be a grass, cereal grain or legume. Cover cropping provides multiple benefits and can be an inexpensive way to build better soil in your garden.

What are the Benefits?

1. More Organic Matter

A key component of healthy soil is the presence of organisms. When spring comes and your cover crop is tilled back into the soil, that material is consumed by bacteria, fungi and other organisms. The portion that is not eaten adds organic matter to the soil.

2. Improved Soil Structure

When your soil is not protected from heavy Western Washington rainfall over the winter months, it becomes vulnerable to nutrient run off, erosion, and compaction. The root system of a cover crop will hold the soil in place and help break up clay soils to allow for better air and water circulation. The cover crop foliage helps buffer the soil from compaction caused by pounding winter rain.

3. Increased Soil Fertility

If your soil is left bare during the winter months, many valuable nutrients can leach out of the root zone when it rains. As your cover crop matures, it begins to absorb nutrients left over from previous compost and soil amendment applications and incorporates them into its plant tissues. The nutrients are now safely stored until spring when the cover crop is cut and tilled back into the soil. As the cover crop begins to decompose, those nutrients will once again become available for new plantings.

King County backyard gardeners who have had a soil test are eligible to receive a sample of FREE cover crop seed (while supplies last). The sample package contains Crimson Clover and Yellow Field Peas (both are legumes that help fix nitrogen in the soil) that can be grown together or separately.



4. Suppressing Weeds

Cover crops can help suppress growth of difficult-to-manage weeds.
Note: It is important to till in the cover crop before IT goes to seed!

5. Establishes Winter Habitat for Native Beneficial Insects

The cover crop foliage will provide important winter habitat for beneficial insects. The clover and pea flowers will provide an early spring food supply to pollinators.

How Do I Plant Cover Crop?

Cover crop should be planted in September through mid-October to allow for germination before cold weather sets in. After your last crops have been harvested, turn the soil under and rake it smooth. The smaller the cover crop seed, the smoother the soil should be. Hand broadcast your allotted amount of seed (sow the Crimson Clover generously and the Yellow Field Peas more sparingly). Be sure to cover the seed with $\frac{1}{4}$ inch of soil to protect from hungry birds and to keep it from drying out. You may need to water the seed if the weather is dry after planting.

When and How Do I Turn the Cover Crop into the Soil?

The seed will germinate and grow during the fall months, from September to December. During the colder winter months, the growth will slow or stop, but will start again as days get longer and the weather warms up in the spring. **Do not allow the cover crop to go to seed!** In early March when the soil has begun to dry out, use a shovel to chop the shoots and work them into the top 3 to 5 inches of soil. Wait at least 10 days to allow shoots to begin decomposing before planting vegetable crops.

Please send pictures, observations and questions of your cover crop planting to info@kcdcommunityag.org. We would love to share your experience with other gardeners!

What if I Have Crops that I Want to Over Winter?

You can sow cover crop seeds in the bare areas of your garden and still leave crops such as garlic and kale to over-winter.



Mixed Sowing of Clover & Peas



Photo Credit: WSU Extension

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