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SUMMARY

Cover cropping is an ancient practice that makes great sense in the modern garden. Cover crops help improve soil quality and water penetration, as well as suppress weed growth and prevent erosion. A bit of extra work reaps big rewards.

Cover Crops in Your Back Yard

by Molly Wahl, UC Master Gardener

Cover crops feed your soil so your soil can feed you.

Q: I have been hearing a lot lately about cover cropping, and I don't know very much about it. I was pretty sure that this was something that large-scale farmers used. How does cover cropping work and can I use it effectively on a smaller scale?

A: Cover cropping is the process of growing plants to improve the overall health of a field, vineyard, orchard, or home garden. We grow most crops to feed ourselves, but cover crops actually feed the soil. Both farmers and backyard gardening enthusiasts have been using cover crops for many years to improve the health of their soil. It's an ancient sustainable gardening practice that is becoming more popular and is easy to incorporate into the modern landscape.

Benefits of Cover Crops:

There are many benefits of cover crops. They filter nitrogen and other nutrients from water before it seeps into groundwater supplies. They can improve soil quality and water penetration and some even provide a biological source of nitrogen for plants.

With their extensive roots and many leaves, cover crops can also suppress weed growth and prevent erosion. Additionally, many attract beneficial insects.

Potential Drawbacks:

There are a couple of potential drawbacks to cover cropping. First, you can't plant a winter crop in the areas where you are actively cover cropping because there won't be space. Also, it is going to take some extra work on your part to plant the cover crop seed, and then chop and till the plants into the soil. Finally, if you normally let your garden space go over the winter, then getting your cover crops started might take some supplemental water before the winter rains start.

Plants To Use:

Many different types of plants can be used as cover crops. If you are looking to build nitrogen in your soil, you will want to plant some type of legume. Commonly used legumes are bell beans, fava beans, common vetch, peas, and red



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clover. Other cover crops, such as cereals like oats or barley, build organic matter. If you want to build nitrogen and increase organic matter you can mix legumes and cereal crops.

Cover Cropping 101:

Purchase your cover crop seed from either a local nursery or from one of the many online seed companies. Many of these vendors sell cover crop mixes. Sometime during September to October, evenly broadcast the seeds over the area you want to cover. You can make neat rows or you can spread the seeds over the entire area. Rake in and cover the seeds with soil from ½ inch to 1 ½ inches deep depending on the type of seed. Keep the soil moist for the first week to aid germination and then water

occasionally while the young plants are establishing themselves. Once the plants have matured you generally will need to water very little. Allow the plants to grow until February to April, depending on how big you want them to get and how long it takes them to begin flowering. Then chop them down at the soil line and turn the green matter over into the soil. Make sure you complete this process three to six weeks before your spring planting to give the newly fixed nitrogen time to become available in the soil and to decrease the chance of spreading soil-borne diseases.

That should be enough information to get you started. Good luck with your cover crops!



Photo: Bell Beans by Chuck A. Ingels, UCCE Sacramento; courtesy U.C. Statewide IPM Program