

Santa Cruz County Farm Bureau Ask Laura Newsletter Column
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Q: What can you tell me about cover crops and how they might benefit my vegetable production?

A: Your question—and its timing—couldn't be better. The Central Coast and California are leaders in vegetable crop production for the state and nation. Cover crops, which are typically not grown for harvest when they are used in vegetable production systems, can play an important beneficial role in your farming operation. Cover crops are included in vegetable rotations for many reasons, most notably to achieve production, regulatory, and environmental goals. Production goals include building soil fertility and quality, regulatory goals include compliance with relevant federal, state, and local legislation, and environmental goals include soil and water resource protection.

A new resource from the University of California's Division of Agriculture and Natural Resources has everything you will want to know about using cover crops in vegetable production. *Cover Cropping for Vegetable Production: A Grower's Handbook*, is available for purchase at most local UC Cooperative Extension offices. You may also purchase it from our online publications department at: <http://anrcatalog.ucdavis.edu/Items/3517.aspx>.

The handbook has research-based information and detail on cover crop botany and species selection, the effects of cover cropping on soil and water management, the effects of cover cropping on pest management, cover crop management, regional considerations, and economics. The book includes many beautiful color photographs, tables, and illustrations to help explain the science associated with cover cropping. Potential benefits of planting cover crops, as noted in the handbook, include:

- Reduced soil erosion by water or wind
- Increased water infiltration
- Fixation of atmospheric nitrogen, which can later become available for cash crops
- Retention of soil nitrogen and nitrogen leaching prevention
- Enhanced soil organic matter and improved long-term soil fertility
- Disruption to plant pathogen and other pest life cycles
- Habitat for beneficial insects

When planting and managing cover crops, it is important to select a particular species or type to match your own production situation, needs and goals. Cover crops have direct establishment and management costs. They can also present management challenges in vegetable farming systems. For example, when planted as a substitute for fallow land during the fall and winter months, cover crops can delay bed preparation, spring planting, and early harvest of a vegetable crop, possibly leading to lower than expected "first-to-market" prices. These are only some of the considerations associated with planting and managing cover crops. In addition to this new resource, your local UC Cooperative Extension Farm Advisors are here to help you with any additional questions you might have.