

Introduction to Cover Crops for Urban Gardens

Cover your bases with cover crops!

Introduction and Benefits

Using cover crops for your garden is one of the most effective practices that can address many gardeners' objectives. In short, a cover crop is a name given to any plant or mixture of plants, like crimson clover, rye, oats, or hairy vetch, which is strategically grown to benefit the garden in one or multiple ways.

Moreover, the benefits are noticed within following planting season and improve with continued use!



Figure 1: Cover Crops grown in a garden. [3]

When to Plant

While cover crops can be seeded almost any time of year, they are typically planted and grown during the growing months particularly after your vegetables have finished producing harvest. Some can grow through the winter and then terminated in the spring. They can also be grown alongside your vegetables in certain applications.

See Figure 4, Approximate Seeding Periods, below to learn more.

What to Plant

Deciding which cover crop to plant depends upon your goals and objectives as well as with the type of soil you have, what was grown and/or what will be grown the following year.

You can plant pure stands, all one type of crop, or mixtures, which involves mixing several types of cover crops.

The *Cover Crop Guide for NY Growers* (<http://covercrop.org/cover-crop-decision-tool>) is an excellent tool to help determine which cover crops would be ideal for your garden goals.

Cover Crop Benefits

- Enhance soil fertility and quality
- Protect against erosion
- Increase soil porosity
- Adds organic matter
- Removes excess nitrogen
- Significantly suppresses weeds
- Attract beneficial insects
- Increases wildlife habitat and biodiversity
- Improves aesthetics
- Limits water evaporation from soil

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See Figure 3 below for more information on strengths of individual cover crops. Or, additionally, you can learn more about the individual benefits of each type of cover crop here: <http://tinyurl.com/heslo8n>



Figure 2: “This rye-vetch cover crop mulch delayed weed growth sufficiently to prevent significant weed competition against the broccoli. The mulch effect effectively blocked most annual weeds...Figure credit: Mark Schonbeck, Virginia Association for Biological Farming.” (Source: <http://articles.extension.org/pages/18524/how-cover-crops-suppress-weeds>)

How to Plant

Once you have obtained your seeds, simply scatter them onto the area you wish to plant and rake over gently. There is no need to till or drill.

Care

There is little care needed while your cover crops are growing. However, it is important to terminate the cover crops prior to when they seed. See the following ‘Q&A’ section to learn more.

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Terminating Cover Crops

Terminating a cover crop, or stopping its growth, is important especially if you do not wish for them to seed and therefore become another weed in your garden. For many urban gardeners, the best way to terminate a cover crop is by cutting, mowing, rowing, or sickling immediately after they flower and definitely before they seed. Herbicides and or tilling can also be used.

Where can I buy seeds locally?

In addition to purchasing online, you can find cover crop seeds at these locations within Hamilton County:

Name and Location	Contact	Notes
Urban Farmer Seeds 120 E 161st St., Westfield, Indiana 46074	(317) 600-2807 www.urbanfarmerwestfield.com	Carries a large variety of seeds and can purchase in bulk. They have a local storefront or you can purchase online at www.ufseeds.com
Habig Garden Shops 15311 North Meridian Street Carmel, Indiana 46033	(317) 896-2828 www.habiggardenshop.weebly.com	Carries crimson clover and rye only. Can order additional varieties.

Q & A

Technical Assistance

Contact the Hamilton County Soil and Water Conservation District to schedule a site visit and learn more about which cover crop plan will meet your needs!

Can this be used in no-till gardens?

Yes, it can. There are several methods to “terminate” the plant if you choose not to till or use herbicide. The two main ways are *cutting* or *rolling*. Both of these should occur immediately after the cover crop flowers and before it seeds. You can then use the cover crop as a mulch to further suppress weeds and retain moisture in the soil.

Does using cover crops interfere with anything?

There may be some interference if you plan to grow an early or late season crop. Intercropping vegetables with cover crops is an option.

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In addition, some cover crops, like cereal rye, leave a chemical in the ground that weeds and some vegetables do not like to grow in the following year. A simple plan or assistance from your local urban agriculture conservationist can eliminate this issue.

Additional Recourses

About Individual Cover Crops, USDA via Mother Hubbards Cupboard
<https://drive.google.com/file/d/oB4s4XpORNGLVQWd3cWZ1RzdmSoU/view>

Cover Crop Growing Info, Urban Farmer Seed –
<http://www.ufseeds.com/Cover-Crop-Growing-Info.html>

Cornell University: Cover Crop Decision Tool
<http://covercrop.org/cover-crop-decision-tool>

Cover Crops for NYC Urban Gardens, Cornell University
http://blogs.cornell.edu/gep/files/2013/08/Cover-Crop-Handouts-PACKET_Zone-7b_English-o8zl97.pdf

Cover Crop Basics, Mother Hubbards Cupboard
http://blogs.cornell.edu/gep/files/2013/08/Cover-Crop-Handouts-PACKET_Zone-7b_English-o8zl97.pdf

How Cover Crops Suppress Weeds
<http://articles.extension.org/pages/18524/how-cover-crops-suppress-weeds>

Cover Crop Uses

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BENEFICIAL INSECTS	CHICKEN FORAGE	COMPACTION CONTROL	DEER ATTRACTANT	EROSION CONTROL	FORAGE	GREEN MANURE	NITROGEN FIXATION	NITROGEN SCAVENGER	NO TILL	ORGANIC MATTER	WEED SUPPRESSION
Alfalfa	Alfalfa	Alfalfa	Alfalfa	Alfalfa	Alfalfa	Alfalfa	Alfalfa	Alfalfa	Alfalfa	Alfalfa	Alfalfa
Barley	Chicory	Clover	Chicory	Barley	Chicory	Barley	Clover	Barley	Barley	Barley	Barley
Clover	Clover		Clover	Clover	Clover	Buckwheat	Cowpeas	Flax	Buckwheat	Buckwheat	Buckwheat
Buckwheat	Cowpea		Cowpea	Cowpea	Forage Pea	Cowpea	Forage Pea	Rye	Clover	Flax	Clover
Chicory	Flax		Forage Pea	Oats	Rape	Flax		Ryegrass	Flax	Forage Pea	Forage Pea
Cowpeas	Forage Pea		Rape	Rye	Turnips	Forage Pea		Vetch	Forage Pea	Oats	Oats
Flax	Rape		Turnips	Wheat	Vetch	Oats		Wheat	Oats	Rye	Rye
Vetch	Turnips		Vetch			Rye			Rye	Ryegrass	Ryegrass
	Vetch					Ryegrass			Ryegrass		Vetch
						Vetch			Vetch		Wheat
						Wheat			Wheat		

Figure 3: Cover crop uses. Credit: Urban Farmer Seeds [1]

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Approximate Seeding Periods [2]

Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec
Frost Seeding – red clover											
Early Spring – annual rye grass, barley, oats, field pea, hairy vetch											
Spring – oats, alfalfa, field pea, red clover, mustards, oilseed radish, rapeseed/canola, turnip (forage type)											
Summer – millets, sorghum-Sudangrass, Sudangrass, alfalfa, berseem clover, crimson clover, sweet clover, buckwheat											
Late Summer/Early Fall – annual rye grass, barley, oats, alfalfa, field pea, hairy vetch, winter pea, mustards, oilseed radish, rapeseed/canola, turnip (forage type)											
Fall – rye, wheat											

Figure 4: You can seed cover crops nearly any time of year depending on your goals and objectives.

Works Cited

- [1] Urban Farmer Seeds, "Cover Crop Growing Guide," [Online]. Available: <http://www.ufseeds.com/Cover-Crop-Growing-Info.html>.
- [2] Midwest Cover Crops Council, Midwest Cover Crops Field Guide, Indiana: Purdue Agriculture Communication, 2012.
- [3] @owgarden, "Cover Crops Basics - What Are They - And How And Why To Use Them For A Great Garden!," 3 July 2016. [Online]. Available: <http://oldworldgardenfarms.com/2013/09/03/cover-crops-basics-what-are-they-and-how-and-why-to-use-them-for-a-great-garden/>. [Accessed 19 December 2016].
- [4] M. Schonbeck, "How Cover Crops Suppress Weeds," 12 June 2015. [Online]. Available: <http://articles.extension.org/pages/18524/how-cover-crops-suppress-weeds>.