

## COVER CROPS

Planting a cover crop, sometimes called green manure, increases soil fertility, improves soil texture, and prevents erosion. Allowing the crop to grow and then tilling it into the ground does this. Alternatively, the crop can be simply cut and left as a mulch where it will decompose. It may also be placed on the compost heap to decay.

Unfortunately, the best crops for this green manure process are not necessarily well adapted to the home garden. These are the legumes such as red or white clover and alfalfa. They do not grow well in the winter when most gardens are bare. They are also perennials and may actually become a weed problem in the home garden unless well tilled into the soil. However, these nitrogen fixing crops may be good possibilities for planting on garden sites that will be fallow throughout the entire growing season.

More feasible for the home gardener are fast growing crops such as annual rye. It is sometimes called winter rye or plow down rye. Wheat or buckwheat is also planted as a cover crop. These crops grow quickly, forming a green mat of vegetation, which will be turned under in the spring. They do not provide as many nutrients as the legume crops, but will add organic matter to the soil, which will improve both clay and sandy soils. Buckwheat is planted in the spring or summer.

The key thing to consider when planting a cover crop is if there will be enough time for the seeds to germinate before it gets too cold. Ideally the rye or wheat should be sown as far in advance of the expected killing frost as possible. This hard frost generally occurs in Washtenaw County around October 15. This means that you may wish to sow cover crops at different times, spreading the seeds over various sections of the garden as individual crops are cleared. The longer the cover crop grows, the more lush its vegetations and the more organic matter it will add to the soil

When seeding wheat or rye, apply seed at the rate of 3 – 4 pounds per 1000 square feet. Rake the seed into the upper inch of soil after spreading it. Keep the area evenly moist until the seed is well germinated.

The **Master Gardener Hotline** is open from April to October, Monday through Friday. Lines are available 9:00 am to noon and 1:00 pm to 4:00 pm at 888-678-3464

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