

The Sooner You Plant Cover Crops The Better!

By: Don Tapio

One of the best investments home gardeners can make this time of year is to plant winter cover crops. Often referred to as “green manures”, cover crops will produce an abundance of lush growth during the winter months that will translate into lots of organic matter for your garden next Spring. They also boost soil fertility, cycle nutrients, improve soil structure, prevent weeds and protect the soil from erosion and compaction.

While cover crops produce green foliage aboveground, their roots are also at work improving soil structure. Legumes, like vetches and clover, have relatively simple root systems that support nitrogen fixing Rhizobium bacteria and penetrate deep into the soil to loosen hard packed beds. As a rule of thumb, legume cover crops provide more nitrogen to the soil, while grasses boost soil organic matter more effectively.

You can plant cover crops by section in your garden, planting the earliest cover crops as soon as harvest is complete. The sooner you plant cover crops the better. Planting now will help recover nutrients, cover the soil more quickly and produce more organic matter. By capturing more nutrients and covering the soil, early planting also improves water quality protection by reducing nutrient leaching, erosion, soil compaction and runoff. For example, WSU researchers found cereal rye planted September 1st will accumulate almost four times as much nitrogen as rye planted September 30th.

Cover crops need a good seedbed just like garden crops. After harvesting your garden crops, turn the soil and rake it smooth. Small seeded crops need the smoothest seedbed. Most of the common cover crops (cereals, vetches, Austrian winter pea, fava bean and buckwheat) have medium to large seeds. Cereal rye is the most commonly grown cover crop in the Northwest. It is vigorous, very cold hardy, and can germinate and become established in cool weather. One commonly grown mixture is cereal rye and hairy vetch, typically planted in the garden at a seeding rate of 1.75 pounds/1000 square feet of rye plus .75 lb/1000 square feet of hairy vetch. The vetch will germinate in the fall, but grows very slowly until spring. Then it will use the more upright rye as a structure on which to grow. Other common cover crop mixtures include oats or barley plus crimson or Austrian field peas.

Simply broadcast cover crops seeds across the area to be planted. Cover the seeds by raking at least ¼ inch deep, or rototill no more than 2 inches deep. This provides good soil-seed contact and protection from drying, which increases germination. You won't be able to work all of the seeds below the surface, so do not be concerned that some seeds remain on the surface. You do not need to fertilize cover crops in an established garden. Our fall rains will provide enough moisture for seed germination and plant establishment. Ideally next spring, turn the cover crop under about three weeks before planting. This gives time for some decomposition to occur, and for the soil to warm. You can turn the cover crop under in sections based on when you plant different parts of the garden.