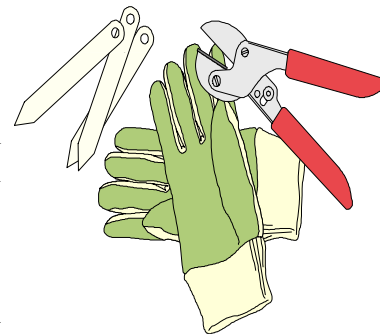


# Growing Cover Crops 101

Our garden soil endures a lot of abuse throughout the growing season. Nutrients are depleted, soil structure is destroyed by tilling and compaction, and soil is left bare and vulnerable to erosion after crops are harvested. Growing cover crops and green manures is an easy way to protect and improve your garden soil during the growing season and throughout the winter months.



Cover crops are grown primarily to reduce erosion and runoff on areas of bare soil where crops have been harvested. They can also serve as green manure if they're tilled or dug into the soil where they will improve soil structure and add valuable organic matter. The organic matter provides necessary food for beneficial earthworms and microorganisms that help keep soil healthy. The root system of most cover crops helps to improve air and water movement in the soil.

We can categorize cover crops into two broad types - legumes and non legumes. Legumes, which include clovers and alfalfa, are widely used because they help fix nitrogen from the air making it available to plant roots in a form that they can readily use. They also form deep taproots which improve soil drainage and aeration and lessen the formation of hardpan. Legumes germinate slowly and should be inoculated with beneficial bacteria before planting to aid in the fixing of nitrogen. Non legumes, like buckwheat, oats, and winter rye are favored for short term production of organic matter for the garden. They are usually sown in late summer or fall and turned under while still green.

Success in growing cover crops means choosing the right crop at the right time of year and using good management techniques to ensure you're reaping all the benefits. There are plenty of cover crops to choose from, but there are a few that work particularly well in the northeast.

To cover bare sections of the garden during late spring or early summer, try using buckwheat or clover. They both attract lots of beneficial bees to the garden to aid in pollinating your crops and are easy to turn under. For a late summer/early fall cover crop, try using oats. This non legume helps suppress weeds until it is killed by frost and can then be easily turned under in the spring. For late fall sowing in the northeast, a good choice is winter rye. It's a very cold hardy grain that can be successfully established even if sown in October. It produces a large amount of top growth in the spring and may need to be mowed before it's turned under. Don't allow your cover crops to set seed or you can end up with a weed problem. Just be sure to mow or till it under at or before flowering.

With so many advantages to using cover crops and green manures, it's unfortunate that their use is not more widespread among home and community gardeners.

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**For More Information on Capital District Community Gardens' programs or to make a tax-deductible donation contact:**



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