

## Why Plant Cover Crops?

Q: In last week's column, you mentioned that fall is the right time to plant cover crops. What are cover crops and why should I do this? Seems like more work to me.

A: Cover crops are plants grown in a garden once all the vegetables or flowers are harvested.

Benefits of planting cover crops are:

- 1) to prevent water runoff and soil erosion;
- 2) to minimize weeds;
- 3) to add nutrients to the soil; and
- 4) to provide a home for beneficial insects.

There are typically two types of cover crops: legumes and grasses. Legumes include crimson clover, vetch, and cowpeas. Grasses include oats, annual ryegrass, wheat, and rye. When cover crops are grown in your garden in the off-season, the soil will not seal over and allow water to run off. The roots of the cover crops will also break up any hard-packed areas that develop when the ground is left uncovered.

Crimson clovers and cowpeas are good cover crops for erosion control. If you have trouble with weeds, cover crops will smother them out during the winter months. This also prevents weeds from producing seeds that develop into summer weeding sessions. Grasses are good for weed control. Plant these earlier so that when they die off in the winter, the ground is covered to weeds from starting up.

Crimson clover and cowpeas add beneficial nitrogen to the soil in addition to helping with erosion control. However, be sure and cut the crimson clover down before it reseeds and wait at least two weeks to a month before you begin planting. You can till the cut crimson clover into the soil so it can decompose and further benefit your garden.

Earthworms love the decaying plant material from cover crops, and their presence will improve your garden's overall health. If you prefer not to till, the dead crimson clover plants will be a 'green mulch' to prevent weeds from sprouting. Beneficial insects thrive in cover crop conditions, too. Lady beetles (AKA lady bugs) eat many aphids. Ground beetles eat aphids as well as snails, cutworms, vine borers, earwigs and even caterpillars.

To get started on your cover crop, you need to get rid of all your weeds first. Till or spade the area and smooth over with a rake, then spread your seed. Lightly rake the seed into the soil then water if needed. In the spring, make sure you cut or pull your cover crop in the flowering stage. Otherwise, you will be fighting your cover crop.

Cover crop seeds are available at local farm and garden stores. We recommend you call ahead to make sure the seeds you want are available. The University of Tennessee Extension publication W235-G (<https://extension.tennessee.edu/publications/Documents/W235-G.pdf>)

and this Clemson website, <https://hgic.clemson.edu/factsheet/cover-crops/>, have more details on cover crops.

There is also the environmental benefit of planting cover crops - carbon reduction. Bare ground gives up carbon to the atmosphere while plants process carbon into the ground.

Even if it seems like more work right now, cover crops are good for your garden and can save you time and money in the long run.