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Don't Leave Your Garden Soil Bare This Winter



Gardeners know that the addition of compost or other fertilizer is key for thriving vegetable plants and abundant harvests. But adding nutrients to the soil isn't the only thing you can do to help your garden grow.

Sowing a winter cover crop at the end of the season can improve soil health—and next year's veggies—during the off season. Here's what to know about using winter cover crops in the home garden, according to an expert.

What Is a Winter Cover Crop?

"A cover crop is grown after the harvest of a production crop to support soil health and protect against erosion," says greenhouse and landscape specialist John Long. "They can help protect the soil, support fertility, and suppress weeds."

Cover crops can be sown by broadcasting seed in the fall after harvesting your main crop, or in summer between spring and fall crops. Specific plants are used as covers because of their ability to improve soil health.

Seeds can be sown either in spring or summer or at the end of the growing season, depending on the type. Cover crops aren't necessarily harvested the way vegetables or other production crops are, though they may be used on commercial farms as animal feed or for other purposes.

Before you can plant, cover crops must be terminated so you can put the main crop in their place—typically when the cover crop flowers but before it sets seed. You can mow down cover crops to terminate them, turn them into the soil, or smother them with a tarp to block the light.

Some winter cover crops, such as oats and peas, will naturally die back in winter if your climate is cold enough. If home gardeners choose to cover crop, they should choose the type of cover they use carefully.

"Unfortunately, most of the common cover crops used in major crop production would be difficult to terminate in the home garden setting, as they produce a large amount of biomass and dense, resilient root systems," Long says.

As an alternative to winter cover crops for home gardeners, Long recommends mulching vegetable beds with wood chips or fall leaves instead.

"Both provide protection for the soil through the winter and added fertility for the upcoming season," he says.

Benefits of Planting Winter Cover Crops:

Cover crops can benefit your garden in different ways, but those benefits depend on what you plant and when you plant them.

"Fall cover crops should be planted early enough to allow enough growth to be well established by the onset of winter. That growth outcompetes spring weeds and provides maximum protection from erosion," Long says.

Meanwhile, cover crops planted in spring on commercial-scale farms are typically planted in fallow ground that won't be used to production crops that season in order to help with soil fertility and quality.

The winter cover crop you choose will also affect the benefits your garden receives. Legumes like peas or clover fix nitrogen, adding nutrients to the soil. Grasses like oats and barley



can help aerate soil and increase organic matter, while brassicas with long taproots like tillage radish to break up clay soils.

For home gardeners, planting a winter cover crop can do more than prevent erosion, suppress weeds, and boost soil quality. When it's time to plant your vegetable garden in spring, the leftover plant material can serve as mulch for your vegetables, blocking weeds, holding in soil moisture, and providing a slow-release form of fertilizer.

4 Popular Winter Cover Crops

If you want to experiment with a winter cover crop, Long recommends planting one or more of these specific varieties due to their ease of termination.

Oats:

Oats—the same ones you might cook for a hearty breakfast—are a go-to grass for a winter or spring cover crop.

You'll want to time sowing in late summer or fall so that the plants die back with winter cold before they set seed. Sow three to four ounces of seed per 100 square feet of garden.

Winter Peas:

Legumes like peas are popular winter cover crops thanks to their nitrogen-fixing abilities. Winter peas, field peas, or Austrian winter peas and are prized for growing quickly and fighting soil compaction as well as adding nutrition to the soil when used as around 30% of a cover crop mix.

Long notes that peas and oats are often planted together in cover crop mixes.

Crimson Clover:

Long recommends perennial crimson clover as an easier-to-terminate winter cover crop to boost nitrogen. It can be sown in spring or in late summer or early fall.

When planted in spring, crimson clover's showy red flowers will appear before termination. Sow one to two ounces per 100 square feet of garden.

Red Clover:

Red clover is another nitrogen-fixing winter cover crop that's easy to terminate. It's easy to establish and shade tolerant, and provides other benefits like preventing erosion, building soil quality, and suppressing weeds.

As with crimson clover, you can broadcast one to two ounces of seed per 100 square feet.

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