

# All About Cover Crops



## What is a cover crop?

A cover crop is a plant that is used during dormant times of the growing season to slow ground erosion, improve soil health, enhance water absorption, manage weed control, and increase biodiversity to your garden. Growing research has shown increased yields from the periodic usage of cover crops in both small and large scale agricultural settings. The typical maturity of most cover crops is approximately 30-40 days, a practical early spring and late fall (over winter) amendment option for gardens.

## Why use a cover crop?

For more advanced gardeners, cover crops can replenish soil of needed nutrients for the upcoming season. A soil test is helpful to determine the type of cover crop to use. However, for a standard suburban garden that uses organic methods for production of various plants during a growing season, a seasonal cover crop is a simply method to manage weeds, build aeration in soil, and improve nutrient density for the next growing season. While compost is a great alternative to kick start any garden, the roots and nodules of cover crops have other advantages. An early spring cover crop is a great option to kick start your garden if you plan on beginning the garden season in May, while a winter cover crop is a great option to turn down the garden at the end of the season if you plan on starting the season early next spring. For more information on cover crops and a demonstration, please visit the GardenWorks Project YouTube channel!



## The benefits of cover crops

Different cover crops will achieve different results, depending on what your soil needs. Building biomass, for example, is a great way to fix soil density for proper root development. Important nutrients, such as nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium, will vary depending on the type of cover crop used.

Cover crops are often called “green manure” as the plants themselves amend soil when turned into the garden. Be sure to turn over into the soil prior to flowering to avoid reseeding. Planting can begin two weeks after turning over crops. Because of the many benefits, more farms are using cover crops between crop rows to encourage pollinators, amend soil, and increase nutrient load.



# Types of Cover crops and FAQs



## Spring cover crops

Begin spring covers as soon as the soil can be worked, and turn over within 30 days. If your garden usually starts early in spring, consider a winter cover instead. Turn over cover crops before flowering and allow two weeks for green manure to fix additional nitrogen into soil.

Examples of productive spring cover crops include peas, oats, favas, and ryegrass.



## Winter cover crops

Sow in late summer or early fall. Let green manure die over winter, and some (mostly grains) will begin again in spring. Turn over green manure in early spring and let biomass build up soil. Begin planting two weeks after turning over.

Examples of productive winter cover crops include hairy vetch, alfalfa, winter rye, winter wheat, white and red clover, and buckwheat.

## FAQs about Cover Crops

**Will cover crops reseed?** Cover crops are most beneficial for the soil when turned over before flowering. Anything that flowers will eventually reseed, so be sure to turn over cover crops prior to flowering.

**How do you plant cover crops?** Cover crops should be sown thickly to avoid competition with weeds. The roots and plants will kill off any weed starts in spring, and in winter, will be used as a weed deterrent through its thick biomass concentration.

**Should often should I use a cover crop?** Most gardeners will choose to use a cover crop once a year. Depending on the health of your soil, you may choose to use a cover crop twice, both in spring and fall. A home soil test may give you guidance on the many types of cover crops to choose from.

For more information and more resources, please visit [www.gardenworksproject.org](http://www.gardenworksproject.org) today.

