

Cover Crops in the Home Garden



Healthy soil is essential for healthy plants and using cover crops in the home garden is one way to promote soil health. Cover crops are non-harvested crops that add organic matter to the soil, transfer nitrogen to plants, and break up heavy clay or compacted soil. They are commonly used in agriculture, but also have a place in the home garden.

Cover crops are planted before a garden is planted, warm season, or after harvest, cool season. Cover crops can also be planted in areas that are unused for the season.

Benefits of cover crops

Cover crops improve soil structure, draw up nutrients from deep in the soil, and increase soil fertility. They also suppress weeds, create habitat for beneficial insects, and increase biodiversity. Crimson clover and cowpeas are legume cover crops that take nitrogen from the air and convert it to a form that future plants can use as nutrients.

Warm-season cover crops

Warm-season cover crops are planted in spring or summer before the garden is planted or in a fallow area.

Options: Buckwheat, cowpeas, and crimson clover.

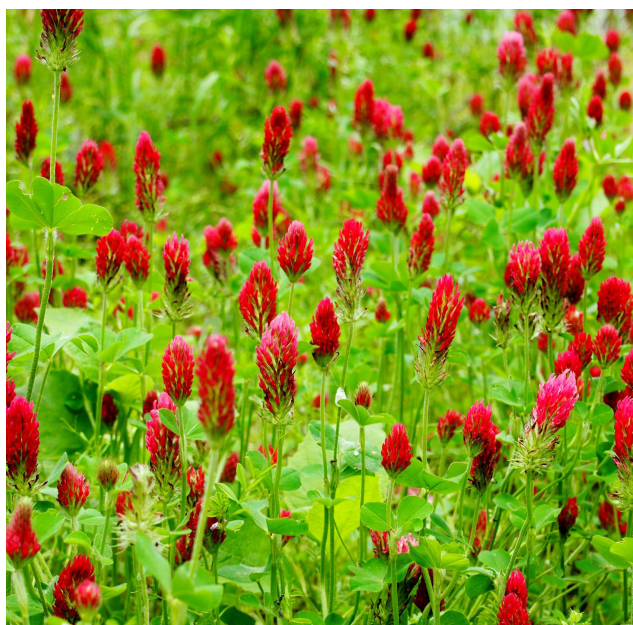
Cool-season cover crops

Cool-season cover crops are planted late summer or early fall after vegetables are harvested. They need to germinate and grow before winter temperatures.

Options: Oats, winter wheat, winter rye, and crimson clover.

How to plant a cover crop

When planting a cover crop, there is no need to cover the seeds. Allow the plants to grow until the flowering stage. Once flowering begins, either mow or cut down as close to the ground as possible to prevent seed formation. If the crop is cut down too early, it may regrow. If it is cut down too late, it may reseed.



Crimson Clover can be used as a warm-season or cool-season cover crop. Using crimson clover increases organic matter and increasing soil fertility by adding nitrogen to the soil. Photo credit: Pixabay

After cutting down the cover crop, leave the cut portion as a mulch on top of the soil or till it into the ground. Both options have their benefits. Leaving the plant material as a mulch can suppress weeds. Tilling can help incorporate the organic matter into the soil, but also disrupts the delicate soil ecosystem.

Winter hardy cover crops or crops not killed by the mowing can be tilled into the soil. A cover crop that is killed by winter temperatures does not need to be tilled into the soil.

Mow, wait, plant

Follow the “mow, wait, plant” rule when using cover crops. After mowing a cover crop, leave the plant debris to sit for 2-4 weeks before planting anything else. The plant residue needs break down and the flush of microbial activity needs to slow before new plants start growing

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