

Cover crops and the Vegetable Garden

Cover crops have been used for years to improve soil. Hard and crusty soils benefit from cover crop organic matter. Heavy weed competition can be reduced growing a cover crop.

Cover crops can be used in the small vegetable garden to preserve and improve the soil. Small gardens will benefit with reduced weeds problems, less soil erosion and additional Organic matter. Cover crops will hold nutrients that would normally leach out during the winter months. Cover crops add organic matter to soil improving texture and structure as they break down.

Small grains like wheat, rye and barley are often first to be considered for use as cover crops. Small grains grow quickly competing with weeds and hold the soil throughout the winter. Managing can be done in different ways with the vegetable crops you are growing. Cover crops can be mowed and cultivated into the soil as a green manure. The nutrients captured by the plants are released as they break down in the soil. Allow the mown cover crop to remain on the surface as mulch and plant through the cover crop without cultivating. This allows the cover crop to serve as mulch, control weed and conserve moisture.

Mowing grains at the pollen forming stage will kill them. This prevents them from becoming a weed problem. Mowing can be done with a lawn mower or weed eater.

Hairy vetch, crimson clover and Austrian winter pea are legumes used for cover crops and can use (fix) nitrogen from the air for themselves and the next crop. These crops can be mowed for mulch or tilled in to add organic matter and nutrients.

Annual and perennial rye grass is used as cover crops because of their ability to suppress weeds. Perennial rye will need to be killed in the spring by cultivation or herbicides.

Small grains can be seeded during September through November. Legumes and grasses are seeded August and September. Buckwheat can be seeded as a short term cover between crops to control weeds and add soil organic matter. Mow buckwheat before it forms seed to keep it from becoming a weed. Buckwheat will not survive a heavy frost.

Healthy garden soil will yield more vegetables to use and to share with your friends.

For more information about cover crops and other topics contact the Cooperative Extension Service Oldham County at 222-9453.