

# COVER CROP

## WHAT IS COVER CROP?

Any crop grown to cover bare soil as a way to improve and protect soil during a dormant season.

## WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF PLANTING COVER CROPS?

- **PROTECTION:** Acts as thick ground cover to suppress weeds; prevents erosions
- **ENRICHMENT:** Improves soil texture (reduces compaction) and fertility. Nutrients stored in the cover crop are released when crops decompose
- **DIVERSITY:** Acts as host to beneficial insects; attracts earthworms, increases bio-mass

## WHEN/HOW SHOULD I PLANT COVER CROP?

A cover crop can be seeded as soon as any vegetable crop has reached maturity and has been harvested. If you have late fall crops, you can sow the cover crop seed in between the rows. Sow seeds while the weather is still warm enough for the seeds to germinate, usually before November, and rake into the top 1-4" of soil. Keep moist.

## WHAT SHOULD I PLANT?

Popular seeds are Rye grain and Legumes, such as Crimson Clover (strains), Garden Pea (strains), Vetch, and Faba (Fava) Beans. These can be planted as a single crop or are often mixed and planted as a blend because of the various benefits offered by different crops.

**Austrian Peas:** Builds tilth and enriches soil. Late Sept -Mid-Nov.

**Crimson Clover:** Good weed controller and enriches the soil. Late Sept-Mid-Oct.

**Faba Beans:** Matures early. Deep roots help break up compacted soil. Late Sept-Mid-Nov.

**Hairy Vetch:** Winter hardy vining annual. Prefers well-drained soil. Late Sept-Mid-Nov.

**Rye:** Germinates quickly and grows rapidly in cool weather. Sept.-early Nov.

## THEN WHAT?

Cover crops seeded in the fall will continue to grow all winter whenever it is warm. In early spring crops are cut down and incorporated into the soil. A no-till method allows you to mow/chop down the foliage and let it remain on the soil to decompose without disturbing the biological activity in the soil.

As plants decompose, microbial activity breaks down the organic matter and creates nutrients that other plants can access. For this reason, cover crops are often referred to as "green manure". While plants can be allowed to die in place and naturally become part of the mulch layer, it is still important for no-till gardeners to remove diseased plants to prevent the spread of vegetation-borne diseases.