

## Cover Crops

By Charles W. Marr, Kansas State University



Cover crops, often called "green manure" crops, are used to hold nutrients in a garden soil, move nutrients from deeper in the soil to more shallow garden crops and, in the case of legumes, add nitrogen from the air to a soil. One problem with cover crops is the time it takes to establish them. This may interfere with the intense use of a backyard garden or flower beds. Instead, many gardeners prefer to use compost as an organic soil amendment since it can be

added at one time and tilled into the soil with soil preparation. Cover crops are more useful in larger gardens with area to spare.

There are several types of crops that can be used as covers. Grasses such as wheat, rye or oats may hold nutrients but do not add nitrogen to the soil. Legumes such as clovers, vetch or alfalfa add nitrogen from the soil. Some cover crops, such as alfalfa, go deep into the soil moving nutrients to the surface for better use by crops. In addition to their soil-improving properties, cover crops can provide winter protection to soils by preventing soil blowing or erosion. But it is important that cover crops be completely tilled under in the early spring before they start growing vigorously. It may be difficult to kill well established cover crops so they don't become a "weed crop" in the vegetables or flowers you want to grow.

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