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## Using Cover Crops in the Home Garden

**B**efore commercial fertilizers were created, farmers used cover crops to increase soil health and productivity. I am starting to get more questions about cover crops and their role in the garden. Farmers in the South have used cover crops as a management practice for years. Now home gardeners are getting involved in this same practice.

A cover crop is living ground cover planted to protect the soil from erosion and other problems. They prevent surface soil crusting and help maintain and improve porosity. They add organic matter to soil, suppress weeds and feed microbes and earthworms. After the cover crop is cut or killed, it can remain on the soil surface as mulch. This will limit weed seed germination by intercepting sunlight, preventing it from reaching the soil surface.

Leguminous cover crops, which are able to fix their own nitrogen from the atmosphere, provide nitrogen for succeeding crops when plant residues are incorporated into the soil. This reduces the growers' needs of having to purchase nitrogen fertilizers. The primary cost of a cover crop is in the seed and planting. To encourage good nitrogen production conditions, you will need a good crop stand, optimum soil nutrient levels and soil pH, good nodulation and adequate soil moisture and temperature.

More home gardeners are using a winter legume cover crop in their garden. They kill the cover crop by mowing, rolling or tilling it. Timing is a key factor when killing cover crops mechanically. It is easier to manage during seed formation when the plants are beginning to dry down. You can take a lawn mower, mow the cover crop, pile up the clippings, turnover the garden and then use the cover crop cuttings as mulch. Once you do these things, you get a good dose of available nitrogen while also building up organic matter in the soil.

Examples of winter legume cover crops include crimson clover, hairy vetch, winter and subterranean clover. Generally, winter cover crops are planted in early fall and allowed to grow until mid-spring, at which time the crop is incorporated by tillage, or killed and left as a surface mulch. Cereal rye and ryegrass are winter nonlegumes that can be planted but with caution.

If you would like to learn more about hairy vetch as a cover crop, visit the Collierville Victory Garden which is a Tennessee Master Gardener Demonstration Garden. Carl Wayne Hardeman will be more than happy to talk to you about it.

Until next time, happy gardening!



*Carl Wayne Hardeman*