
COVER CROPS

Cover crops are a temporary crop that are planted in the fall or spring, then tilled into the soil in the spring or fall to add organic matter and nutrients to the soil. There are two general types of cover crop – leguminous and non-leguminous. Leguminous cover crops, such as Austrian field peas and crimson clover, add nitrogen to the soil by fixing nitrogen. Nitrogen fixation is a process in which the plant converts gaseous nitrogen into a form of nitrogen accessible to other plants and organisms. Non-leguminous cover crops, such as wheat and ryegrass, add organic matter and improve soil aggregation. Having a mix of legumes and non-legumes, generally is a good idea and an encouraged way to cover crop.

For fall planting, it is important to plant cover crops early to establish early root growth before cold weather occurs. This helps the crops better survive a hard winter. Plant between mid-September to the end of November for best success. In the spring, till the cover crop into the soil before it goes to seed.

There are many benefits to growing cover crops –

- reduced soil erosion and compaction during winter
- improved soil structure and reduced surface crusting
- increased water-holding capacity of the soil
- reduced winter weed growth
- provide nitrogen if the cover crop is a legume

AUSTRIAN FIELD PEAS

Austrian Field Peas make an excellent winter cover crop in this area, due to their excellent adaptation to heavy wet soil. These Field Peas should create a lush mass of foliage within a few weeks, and will last all winter. Fixes nitrogen. Sow in fall.

The recommended seeding rate is 3 oz per 100 square feet.

ALFALFA

Hardy, drought tolerant, nitrogen fixer, but needs warm temperatures to germinate. Deep rooted plants that break up hard surfaces and bring trace elements to the surface. Lime if pH is low. Sow in spring/late summer.

The recommended seeding rate is ½ oz per 100 square feet.

CRIMSON CLOVER

Crimson Clover is probably the most commonly used and most desirable of the clovers grown for a cover crop. This nitrogen fixing legume is tolerant of most soil types and prefers a sun to partial sun location. Crimson Clover will grow to 6-18 inches, and blooms from March to May with deep red flowers. For best results, plow into soil 2-3 weeks before the succeeding crop is planted. Requires liming soil for best results. Sow in fall/spring.

The recommended seeding rate is 1/3 oz per 100 square feet.

HAIRY VETCH

Hardy, nitrogen fixer that can be slow to establish. A great one to add to a mix. Can become weedy if not cut and tilled in before flowering. Sow in early fall.

The recommended seeding rate is 2 ½ oz per 100 square feet.

WINTER RYE

Very hardy cereal grain that can be planted later than other cover crops with success, all the way up until late October. Very fast growing, being able to outcompete many noxious weeds. Forms large root systems, reducing soil erosion and compaction. Sow in fall.

The recommended seeding rate is 4 oz per 100 square feet.