

# HOME & GARDEN

## Don't overlook 'green manure'

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Recorder Columnist

My garden has two problems. In spite of all my mulching (and weeding) I must confess to having a few weeds, especially at this time of the year when I am so busy harvesting. And even more importantly I have a very low soil fertility. This was very plainly stated in the complete soil test that I had done early in the season.

Fortunately there is one thing I can do to combat both problems — plant a cover crop. My soil is too poor to overlook any means of improvement so even though the canning and freezing season is in full swing and I'm still getting delicious salads, some sections of the garden are going by. Peas are out, of course, as well as the first plantings of lettuce, mustard, chard and bush beans. As each comes out, a cover crop goes in.

A cover crop acts in a variety of ways. First it acts to prevent erosion during the fall, winter and early spring months when there is no garden crop in place.

Secondly, it holds nutrients in the soil and prevents them from running off in the autumn and spring rains. Also as it grows and sends its roots deep into the soil, it brings in those nutrients up and into the crop where they will be incorporated into the topsoil when the cover crop is tilled under.

### BETWEEN THE ROWS

Remember the root systems of cover crops like rye, clover and buckwheat are extensive. A scientist once grew a single rye plant in a box for four months and then measured the combined length of all the roots. It came to 387 miles! Not only is the organic material in the top of the cover crop added to the soil, but all those roots loosen the soil, make it easier for rain to penetrate and then ultimately, when they rot, the soil is enriched still more.

When legumes like clover and alfalfa are planted, nitrogen is also added to the soil because legumes have the wonderful ability to take nitrogen from the air and fix it in the soil. This nitrogen is then available to other plants grown in the same spot afterwards.

There are different ways of employing green manures. One of my neighbors essentially has two gardens, one that is currently producing their vegetables and the other is planted to buckwheat. This will be turned under in the spring in preparation to being planted with next year's vegetables and this year's vegetable plot will be planted to buckwheat. This rotating garden system helps to build up and maintain soil fertility.

At the moment I don't have suitable space for two gardens so as I take out each section of my garden I add lime, a little half-finished compost and plant rye. The rye will begin to grow this fall and go dormant during the winter, but will begin growing very early in the spring. Again, the green manures will aid my soil's fertility and tilth and it will even help control weeds.

Rye is a standard fall planted cover crop. It will germinate when temperatures are in the 30s, will survive winter temperatures to -40 and will start to grow in the spring when temperatures reach 40. Also it is excellent at gathering up potassium and potassium is one of the major nutrients my soil needs sorely. I feel that in my situation rye is an ideal cover crop.

Proper fertilization of a garden is terribly important and people who rely on chemical fertilizers can be letting themselves in for a big expense. However, by adding chemical fertilizers you are ignoring the need to feed the rich microbial life of the soil which aids in unlocking the nutrients in the soil.

Planting a cover crop is one of the most inexpensive ways of fertilizing the soil. A couple of dollars worth of rye seed will cover my garden and with a cover crop I am indeed feeding the soil.

Almost as a bonus, cover crops help control weeds.

### Charcoal can deactivate herbicides

The University of Connecticut Cooperative Extension Service reports that there are ways to neutralize an overapplication of weed killer.

Some herbicides can be deactivated by using activated carbon (charcoal) at 2 pounds per 150 square feet. Some herbicides that can be deactivated are 2,4-D, atrazine, simazine (Princep), mecoprop (M.C.P.P.), benfen (Balon), bensulide (Belasan), dacthal and pronamide (Kerb).

Activated carbon can be used to deactivate some pesticide spills and is also useful in deodorizing areas that were sprayed by skunks.



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