

Home/Garden

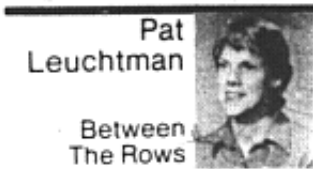
Your garden feeds you, so go feed your garden

By August my garden takes on a jungle aspect and it's almost possible to forget that healthy growth begins with the healthy soil hidden beneath all that foliage. Fall is a good time to enrich the soil in as many ways as we can to replace all the nutrients that have gone into our vegetables, into our kitchens — and into us.

One way is by building and using compost and returning garden residues and leaves to the soil.

Another way is by planting a cover crop. This term indicates that the crop is planted to cover the soil, to keep it from blowing or washing away over the winter when it is bare and exposed to the elements.

Even more importantly, the roots of cover crops pull nutrients from deep in the ground and store all that nutrition in their top growth. For this reason, cover crops are sometimes called "catch crops" because they "catch" valuable nutrients from deep in the soil and keep them from leaching away. For this reason they are also sometimes referred to as "green manure."



Pat Leuchtman

Between The Rows

In New England one of the most common cover crops is annual ryegrass. It grows fast and the grass mat that is left after it's been killed by winter cold protects the soil from erosion and is easily tilled under when it's time to plant the first spring crops.

Winter rye is different from annual ryegrass. Even in New England it will not completely die over the winter. It grows vigorously in the fall and begins active growth very early in the spring. After it's tilled in you'll need to wait an extra couple of weeks for that green matter to decompose sufficiently before you plant your spring crops.

Oats are another small grain that work well as a cover crop. They can

be planted from August until the first frost and still have enough time to make good growth. Oats will be killed when winter temperatures set in, but with a cover crop that is not a problem.

Hairy vetch will grow even in the poorest soils. In addition to providing erosion control and organic matter to the soil, it fixes nitrogen. It works well when planted in the fall in combination with winter rye.

Whether you till your whole garden in the fall and plant some kind of cover crop, or plant a bed as each vegetable is harvested, you need to prepare your soil.

Till the soil and add lime at this time if it's acid. A PH of 6 to 7 is ideal for most vegetable gardens. Sow the seed and rake it in so it's covered with soil. Walk on the seed bed to make sure the seed is firmly in contact with the soil. If the weather is dry, keep your cover crop watered while the seeds germinate and put down roots.

In the spring, you can till under any crop that has been winterkilled as soon as it's safe to work the soil. A crop like winter rye will probably have put out such heavy growth that

it might be a good idea to mow it before you turn it under. You should allow at least two weeks before tilling in your cover crop and planting spring vegetables.

Some people have a large enough garden space so that they can always have a portion planted to a cover crop and this becomes a part of their crop rotation plan.

If you plant a cover crop in the spring you have more choices. Buckwheat will grow anywhere and is especially good if you are starting a new garden. It will help loosen up tough sod and discourage weeds. Plant once, cut it and till it in, then plant it again for a really good start in a new garden space.

Clover, like other legumes fixes nitrogen in the soil. Red clover reaches a height of one to two feet and produces lots of green foliage. If it's not cut before its seed is set, it will usually die in one season.

Alsike clover is similar, but the flowers are pink or white and it's more forgiving of poor or acid soil, or soil that isn't well drained. It's an excellent nitrogen producer.

If your garden is going to feed you, you need to feed your soil. Let your garden feast on a cover crop.



Recorder/Pat Allen

Front doors make a good first impression

Here's the answer