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## Cover Crops for Vegetable Gardens

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Cover crops are beneficial plants used to cover areas of a garden when it is not being used. There are several reasons for planting cover crops: to add nutrients to the soil; to prevent erosion on idle ground; or to suppress weed growth.

Cover crops can be planted in late summer if there are areas of the garden that have been harvested. Cover crops are quite beneficial because they can increase nutrients and suppress weeds in unused garden areas.

Fall cover crops include two primary categories of plants: legumes and cereal grains. Legumes can convert nitrogen to plant available forms through a “partnership” with beneficial soil bacteria. This increases the amount of nitrogen available to crops the following spring. Some legumes that can be used for cover crops in our area are: Austrian peas, hairy vetch, common vetch, and some varieties of clover. Nitrogen is the nutrient that is most commonly in short supply in gardens in our area.

Cereal grains produce large quantities of organic material, which adds to the ability of the soil to retain moisture and helps create ideal soil texture. They can also help to tie up nutrients for the winter and early spring months that would otherwise be lost. Cereal grain possibilities are cereal rye, oats and winter wheat. It is a good idea to combine legumes and cereal grains in a garden bed, such as winter peas and cereal rye.

The cover crops are all quite hardy, and should survive in a normal winter in north Idaho. It is best to plant a cover crop before cold weather slows or prevents good germination. In spring when the ground can be worked, simply turn the cover crop under, allowing it to decompose for several weeks before planting the produce crops that one wants to grow that season.

For more information, attend the Fall Cover Crops class at Moose Valley’s Find Out Fridays series at 10 am August 22. For more information on the classes, please call 267-5108.

*Mike Bauer is the Horticulturist for Moose Valley Farms, a full-service garden center located in Naples at mile marker 495. Please feel free to call us at 267-5108 or stop in if you have any questions.*