

# The Ins and Outs of Cover Crops

I am always surprised when summer ends so quickly. One day it seems like I am running from the sun and the next seeking it out to warm up. As I was seeking the sun today, I suddenly remembered it is time for planting cover crops.

Broadly put, a cover crop is an annual planting of grasses or legumes that protect the soil from erosion and increase the fertility of the soil. Cover crops keep weeds down, host beneficial insects, improve the structure and arability of the soil, and break up hard soil. When the cover crop season ends in early spring, it is turned back into the soil to provide organic matter to increase soil fertility. If a legume is used, it will help increase the soil's nitrogen. Nitrogen is in chlorophyll, a green chemical that allows plants to capture energy from the sun and make food for the plant in a process called photosynthesis.

My best experience of planting cover crops in my vegetable beds is with Miranda Peas and Austrian Winter Peas. These two varieties are easy to plant, easy to maintain, and easy to turn back into the soil when spring comes. A great bonus with Miranda Peas are the edible pods that appear early spring and are delicious raw. None make it into our house so I do not know how they taste cooked.

To make the most of a legume (pea) cover crop, inoculate the seed prior to planting. This increases the amount of nitrogen that the peas are able to "fix" or change into a usable form of nitrogen in the soil. Make sure the inoculant that you use is the right one for the pea being planted. I use a mixture of half milk and half water to moisten the pea seeds then roll the seeds around in the inoculants right before planting. It is often recommended to plant the seed about the depth equal to the seed. Being the lazy gardener, I inoculate the seed, toss handfuls throughout the garden beds and cover with straw.

Then the fun begins as nature takes over from there, though you may need to water once in awhile. I let my peas grow until I am ready to plant in the spring. At that point, I turn the peas into the soil with a pitchfork. So grow in the winter, you and your garden will be ready come spring.