



With the start of fall, gardeners can reflect on another growing season having past. During the summer, our gardens were a pleasure to view. But now, they look tired and neglected. The thick and strong squash vines of summer are now a mass of blackened, twisted rope. Our tired tomato plants still clinging to their stakes are probably overcome by the weeds of late summer. Their battle with nature seems lost. There must be a way to change this inevitable desolate look in our gardens each fall? How?

Think about seeding a soft, thick cover crop on your garden this fall. According to Thomas Becker, York County Extension agent in horticulture, planting a well manageed cover crop on your garden offers an attractive alternative to prevent winter erosion from occurring.

A wise gardener should never let his soil remain bare. Cover crops protect the soil by helping to prevent leaching losses of plant nutrients. They often supply needed organic matter to the gardens and help the gardener maintain good soil structure in his garden. This leads to improved aeration in your garden soil and increases the water holding capacity of the soil for the following growing season. And surprisingly, popular cover crops like annual ryegrass, annual field bromegrass and winter rye for crop farmers often are the most popular with gardeners too.

When do we begin seeding cover

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crops? Gardeners can seed them after each consecutive crop is taken off or wait till the whole garden is harvested. For instance, having harvested a row of corn, spread the cover crop seed on and between the row. Or a gardener could plant a cover crop between rows of vegetables that have still not been harvested. Either way, your cover crop appears in only a few weeks and stays green right through till the first heavy snow cover.

Let's look at some of these winter cover crops. Winter rye is our hardiest winter small grain. It's an important winter cover crop not only on gardens, but also on Pennsylvania's cropland. A seeding rate of two-and-one-half pounds per 1,000 square feet should sufficiently protect the soil. Winter rye requires only three-quarters of an inch of soil for cover and can be planted right up to Oct. 15 in the Southeastern part of the state.

Annual field bromegrass has a thick fibrous root system. It is very cold hardy and you need only one pound of seed for every 1,000 square feet. Annual Ryegrass grows rapidly after seeding in the fall at one pound per 1,000 square feet. It often dies before spring, making it the easiest to till under.

Other possible legume cover crops like winter vetch and sweet clover may work but could be difficult to completely eliminate in the garden next year. When planting, use a cyclone or drill seeder to uniformly distribute the seed.

In the spring, when should our garden cover crop be plowed under? Don't wait too long is the best advice anyone can give you.



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