



Get Covered!!!

Fall Cover Crops Feed the Soil and Next Year's Crop

As fall approaches here in Kentucky and we wrap up the last of our summer canning and plant our winter greens, it's a good time to think about putting in a fall cover crop to boost soil health for next year's crop. "Since we measure soil health by the soil's physical, biological and chemical properties, we need to farm in such a way that we not only stop degrading these soil properties but farm in a way that heals these soil properties," says Kentucky NRCS Soil Health Specialist, John Graham.

As a personal experiment, I took one of Mr. Graham's fall cover crop planting recommendations to heart and applied it on my vegetable garden spot in the fall of 2013.

Full of mutual hope and skepticism, my husband and I sowed our mixture of Diakon Radish, Austrian Winter Peas, Cereal Rye Grass and Crimson Clover before September 15 and waited for spring. I'm certain none of us, especially those of us tending livestock, have forgotten the brutal winter that has made me dread all winters to come. So, when spring arrived and our cover crop began to green up, well, let me just say I was never so glad to see something green sprouting from the earth. We let the stand get really established and then rolled it down in early May, leaving the residue to create a thatch for weed control and to nourish the soil. We planted tomatoes by hand into the thatch and without any added fertilizer or any sprays for disease or insects, we had a

beautiful harvest of heirloom tomatoes (pictured at center). I called our garden an experiment, mainly because I didn't have time to do anything except plant a few tomatoes and walk away (later in the season, I did have to wade through Johnson grass to find my tomatoes! But it worked out well enough for me to look for cover crop seed again.

Choosing the right cover crop blend is important and appropriate planting times are crucial if you're going to be successful. The beautiful thing about this method of farming is that your soils keep

improving year after year and producers can expect better water infiltration, improved permeability, greater pore space, increased water holding capacity, better microbial habitat, greater nutrient cycling, increased soil organic matter and a reduction/elimination of commercial fertilizer and

chemicals. If you are interested in alternative cover crops to build soil health you can get further information from NRCS soil health experts at your local USDA Service Center or you can visit:

<http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/ky/soils>.

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