Cover Crops for NYC Urban Gardens

What are “cover crops”?
Cover crops are close-growing crops planted either in rotation with food crops, or between food crops to enrich the soil. Before planting the next vegetable crop, the cover crops can be cut and left as mulch on the soil surface, or turned in to the soil.

How can cover crops contribute to a healthy garden?
- Protect the soil from wind, rain, and melting snow
- Improve soil structure by creating pores, which increase aeration and help the soil hold more water
- Feed beneficial soil critters
- Add nutrients to the soil
- Shade out weeds early in the season
- Attract beneficial insects like bees & ladybugs
- Increase crop yields

Steps to cover cropping in your garden
- **Choose a cover crop:** Use the chart on the opposite side of this page to choose a cover crop that fits your vegetable planting schedule, gardening goals, and garden site.
- **Plant the seed:** (Remember: you can “under-seed” beneath & between food crops!)
  - Clean your plot. Remove weeds & crop residues, and stake and prune crops that are still producing. This creates space and light for your cover crop to grow.
  - Rake the soil to create a fine seedbed.
  - Broadcast the seed evenly and gently rake in.
  - COVER the newly planted seeds with row cover, to protect them from birds until the plants are established.
- **In the spring, cut down cover crops when they start to flower but BEFORE they produce seed**, in late April or early May. Leave the shoots as mulch, or dig them into the soil. If you dig them in, wait 2-3 weeks before planting vegetables.

To learn more about cover crops for urban gardeners:
Please visit our website at [http://blogs.cornell.edu/gep/](http://blogs.cornell.edu/gep/)
Winter-kill cover crops: These are planted in late summer and killed by the winter cold. These don’t grow as much as over-wintering cover crops (see below), but you can plant early spring crops into the dead mulch next season.

**Peas + Oats**

- **Plant date:** mid-August
- Oats grow quickly & suppress weeds
- Pea is a legume (fixes N)

**Over-wintering cover crops:** These are planted in fall and survive the winter. Spring growth adds more organic matter and nitrogen (for legumes), but you need to wait until late April or early May to cut down the cover crop before you can plant vegetables.

**Crimson clover or**

**Crimson clover + Winter Rye**

- **Plant date:** early September
- Crimson clover is a legume (fixes N), & attracts beneficial insects. Somewhat shade-tolerant.
- Rye grows quickly and produces lots of plant material for soil quality, weed suppression, and mulch.

**Hairy vetch or**

**Hairy vetch + Winter Rye**

- **Plant date:** late September – early October
- Hairy vetch is a legume (fixes N) & attracts beneficial insects.
- Rye grows quickly and produces lots of plant material for soil quality, weed suppression, and mulch.

**Summer cover crops:** These are planted in the window after early spring crops (like lettuce) and before crops for a fall harvest (like broccoli or kale). These cover crops can shade out weeds and add organic matter in the few months between spring and fall plantings.

**Buckwheat or Buckwheat + Crimson Clover**

- **Plant date:** May – early August
- Buckwheat grows quickly, suppresses weeds, and attracts beneficial insects. Trim the buckwheat when it starts flowering to give the clover light to grow & fix nitrogen.
