



# Cover Crops for Vegetable Gardens

*Maurice Ogutu,  
Extension Educator, Local Food Systems and Small Farms,  
ogutu@illinois.edu*

Fall is the time to start thinking about cover crops for the vegetable garden, according to Maurice Ogutu, a University of Illinois Extension horticulture educator. Every year home gardeners add compost, manure, or other organic materials to their gardens, which are used by earthworms, bacteria, fungi, and nematodes to make healthy fertile soil.

Cover crops, referred to as green manure crops, are another source of organic matter for home vegetable gardens. In the spring, when the cover crop is plowed under the nutrients in the cover crop are recycled back into the soil. Cover crops can also reduce soil erosion, improve soil moisture retention in sandy soils, and improve drainage in heavy clay soils.

Legumes have the advantage of fixing nitrogen in conjunction with helpful bacteria, especially if combined with an compatible inoculant when planting.

## Cover Crop Suggestions

- Legumes, such as Austrian peas or hairy vetch
- Winter wheat
- Oats
- Buckwheat
- Mustard
- Ryegrass
- Peas

Johnny's Seeds Fall Green Manure Mix is comprised of winter rye, field peas, ryegrass, crimson clover and hairy vetch

Cover crops can be planted immediately after harvesting vegetables. They require at least four weeks of growth before the cold weather sets in. After removing plant debris and till the top 6 inches of soil, add compost or well-rotted manure, 20 pounds per 100 square feet or complete fertilizers such as 15-15-15 at the rate of one pound per 100 square feet. Plant cover crops in rows that are close together; between 1/4 and 1/6 pound per 100 square feet.

In the spring, mow the cover crop before it goes to seed and till it under as soon as the ground can be plowed. The cover crop needs to be tilled 3 to 6 weeks before planting vegetables.

Cover crop seeds can be purchased at your local garden center or can be ordered from sources like [www.johnnyseeds.com](http://www.johnnyseeds.com), [www.seedway.com](http://www.seedway.com) or [www.groworganic.com](http://www.groworganic.com).

For additional information, please check the Cornell University website at <http://covercrops.cals.cornell.edu/>.

