

Tried and True Cover Crops

Best Bets to Enrich Soil (page 2 of 2)

Best Bets: Plants
for Particular Uses
in the Mid-Atlantic

Cover crops are often transition plantings used in crop rotation or before establishing more permanent landscaping to improve soil texture, water infiltration, or fertility. They can be used in barren areas where soil is depleted, compacted, or eroded, but they also can serve as green mulch in beds. Many store nitrogen in soil, which promotes growth of later plantings.



Winter Cover Crop Mixtures*	Image**
<p>Plant cover crop seed mixtures for winter cover from early September through mid October. Cover crop mixtures may contain two, three or several different cover crops and are often more effective than a single species planted alone. A mix can combine the nitrogen fixing effects of one or more legumes with the soil building properties of one or more grains or other plant species.</p>	
Summer Cover Crops*	Images**
<p>Buckwheat (<i>Fagopyrum esculentum</i>) Plant from June through July as a quick cover crop between spring and fall plantings (after early lettuce and before fall kale or after spring pansies and before fall mums). Grows quickly up to 24 inches, producing abundant small white flowers in 5 to 6 weeks. Attracts beneficial insects, including pollinators for summer crops. Smothers weeds. Stores phosphorus to release for next crop. To prevent reseeding, cut before dark seeds form in flowers. Stems and roots are easy to cut up and till into soil.</p>	
<p>Cowpeas (<i>Vigna unguiculata</i>) Plant in late spring after soil has completely warmed as this crop is frost sensitive. Fast-growing in hot weather. High nitrogen producer and good soil builder. Cowpeas are edible (black-eyed peas and crowder peas are varieties of cowpea). Cut cowpeas after pod formation for higher nitrogen production. If pods are allowed to mature for harvest as a food crop, cut and till into soil as soon as harvest is complete to prevent stink bug attraction.</p>	
<p>*The planting schedules described above are for cover crops in USDA Plant Zone 7. ** Images show a cover crop mixture in October, buckwheat in August, and cowpeas in September.</p>	
<p><i>developed by Master Gardeners of Northern Virginia, serving Arlington and Alexandria</i></p>	

Images by Judy Salveson (cover crop mixture), private garden, Arlington, VA; by [Pixabay](#) (buckwheat); and by Mary Free (cowpeas), Windmill Hill Park Shoreline Rehabilitation Project, Alexandria, VA

The winter and summer cover crops and mixes described on pages 1 & 2 are used at the MGNV Demonstration [Organic Vegetable Garden](#) located in the Potomac Overlook Regional Park (2845 Marcey Road, Arlington, Virginia). Visitors are welcome to observe the crops growing there during the appropriate seasons.

For more information about cover crops, visit the Virginia Tech website: www.vt.edu and search "Cover Crops." Also, visit www.sare.org and search for "[Building Soils for Better Crops, 3rd Edition](#)" by Fred Madoff and Harold Van Es (2010) and "[Managing Cover Crops Profitably, 3rd Edition](#)" (2007), both published by the Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) program, with funding from the National Institute of Food and Agriculture, U.S. Department of Agriculture.



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