

The Organic Sprout

MOFGA's Newsletter
for Organic Producers

Fall Cover Crops

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It may be August by the calendar, but fall is just around the corner and so it's time to consider potential fall cover crops. Cover crops improve soil tilth and prevent soil nutrient loss to leaching or erosion. While cover crops like rye and oats can be seeded late into the fall, for maximum effect an August seeding may be beneficial. In trials done by Eric Sideman, a mid-August planting date for winter rye showed the best result for soil protection and crop growth. On the other hand, I have found that a late August planting of oats provides adequate cover and the amount of growth can be easily incorporated in the spring before planting. The main considerations in choosing a fall cover crop are: what are the goals for the cover crop and what is the intended use of the area next season?



In general, I like to think of my farm in terms of blocks or management units. These can either be uniform (1000 square feet, an acre or ten acres) or correspond to your existing fields. When I consider a potential crop block for next year I make a mental list of the positive and negative aspects of that land. This includes important factors such as:

- **Seasonal wetness** - in a wet spring is the field accessible, not only to plant commercial crops but to mow or till in the cover crop? This year, for example, it was

too wet in June to mow and till winter rye, which then translated to a large amount of plant material on the surface, which was challenging to incorporate. Or, does the field dry out early and give an opportunity for early cover crop incorporation and planting?

- **Weed pressure** - was prior weed control in this field appropriate for the crop planned for next season, or do I need an opportunity to diminish the weed seed bank? Am I interested in planting a less aggressive crop like carrots or onions or will a fast growing crop like green beans allow me to utilize an area before the weeds can go to seed.
- **Fertility** - how does the management and fertility history of the field affect what I need to plant for the fall and for next season's crops? For example, what is the soil organic matter level and could the soil benefit from a legume cover crop?

There are other aspects to consider, but I find having a number of planting blocks gives me more options for deciding what to plant for a fall cover crop. If an area is not needed for commercial production next year or if I can delay planting the crop until after the overwintering cover crop has been incorporated, I will utilize a winter rye perhaps mixed with vetch. Ideally I would seed this in mid-August and wait to incorporate the planting until mid to late June, being careful not to let the crop go to seed. On the other hand, if a block will be needed for an early spring crop or if I'm not sure how I will use the block next year, I may opt for a planting of oats that will be easy to incorporate in the spring. In these cases I may choose
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to add a field pea to the oats, as it will winter kill as well. Whether the nitrogen fixed by the peas will be available in the spring is up for debate, but the resulting diversity of roots and leaves does appear to have a beneficial effect.

As for cover crop seeding methods, I have had good success with broadcasting, either with a spinner or a drop spreader and covering the seed with a light raking for small areas or with a light tillage such as a three point hitch disc. Finally, when I order my cover crop seed I usually purchase extra oats to seed into areas that open up later in the fall, or to over-seed into growing crops to hold the soil and retain nutrients over the winter.

Field clean up and cover cropping may be the last thing we want to think about in this busy season, but a little planning can go along way in improving conditions for next year's crops.