Cover Crops
Objectives

Student will learn...

- advantages and uses of cover crops in organic and permaculture farming
- how to choose best cover crops to use in different applications
- different application methods
- different methods of incorporation
Definitions

- **Cover Crop**: any crop seeded primarily for the purpose of improving or holding soil.

- **Cash crop**: a crop seeded primarily for sale.

- **Top Soil**: the top layer of soil, usually containing the highest proportion of organic matter and nutrients.

- **Organic matter**: nutrient-rich, biologically-derived soil ingredient.
Advantages and uses of cover crops

Cover crops are an excellent way to hold and stabilize topsoil when land is not in use.
advantages...

- Cover crops with deep roots are frequently used to loosen hard soils
advantages...

- legume-family cover crops can “fix” nitrogen, i.e. make soil-bound nitrogen more available to plants
advantages...

Once tilled-in, cover crops add organic matter and build soil fertility
Cover crops are sometimes used as a weed barrier between rows of crops.
Advantages...

- Some cover crops can attract beneficial insects
Select cover crops’ uses

**Cover Crop Chart**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Species</th>
<th>When To Plant</th>
<th>Min Germ Temp</th>
<th>Max Germ Temp</th>
<th>Seed Depth Inches</th>
<th>Seed Per 1000 sq ft</th>
<th>Pounds Of Seed Per Acre</th>
<th>Hardiness To Zone</th>
<th>Legume A Source</th>
<th>Nitrogen Fixer</th>
<th>Chokes Out Weed</th>
<th>Forage or Hay</th>
<th>Attracts Beneficial Insects</th>
<th>Erosion Control</th>
<th>Nematode/Symbiotic Control</th>
<th>Soil Builder</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Legumes</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Summer Alfalfa</td>
<td>Late Summer</td>
<td>45°F</td>
<td>1½-2½</td>
<td>½ lb</td>
<td>12-15</td>
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<td>Hairy Vetch</td>
<td>Early Autumn, Spring, Summer</td>
<td>55°F</td>
<td>1½-2½</td>
<td>1 lb</td>
<td>25-40</td>
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<td>Common Vetch</td>
<td>Early Autumn, Spring, Summer</td>
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<td>1½-2½</td>
<td>1 lb</td>
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<tr>
<td>Crimson Clover</td>
<td>Anytime</td>
<td>45°F</td>
<td>1½-½</td>
<td>1.2 lbs</td>
<td>30-40</td>
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<td>Mammoth Red Clover</td>
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<td>40°F</td>
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<td>20</td>
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<td>Medic Mix</td>
<td>Autumn/Early Spring</td>
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<td>1 lb</td>
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<td>Fava Beans</td>
<td>Autumn</td>
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<td><strong>Cereal Grains &amp; Brassicas</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Mustard</td>
<td>Early Autumn &amp; Spring</td>
<td>40°F</td>
<td>¼-¼</td>
<td>¼ lb</td>
<td>6-10</td>
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<td>Radish</td>
<td>Autumn</td>
<td>45°F</td>
<td>¼-½</td>
<td>½ lb</td>
<td>10-12</td>
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<td>Turnips</td>
<td>Autumn</td>
<td>45°F</td>
<td>¼-½</td>
<td>¼ lb</td>
<td>4-6</td>
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<td>Annual Rye Grass</td>
<td>Early Autumn</td>
<td>40°F</td>
<td>0-½</td>
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<td>Winter Rye Grain</td>
<td>Autumn</td>
<td>34°F</td>
<td>½-2</td>
<td>4-5 lbs</td>
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<td>Winter Barley</td>
<td>Late Summer to Autumn</td>
<td>37°F</td>
<td>¼-2</td>
<td>2-3 lbs</td>
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<td>Winter Triticale</td>
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<td>Winter Wheat</td>
<td>Autumn</td>
<td>38°F</td>
<td>½-1½</td>
<td>3-4 lbs</td>
<td>70-150</td>
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<tr>
<td>Winter Oats</td>
<td>Autumn</td>
<td>38°F</td>
<td>¼-2</td>
<td>1-2 lbs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Buckwheat</td>
<td>After last frost</td>
<td>48°F</td>
<td>½-1½</td>
<td>2-3 lbs</td>
<td>50</td>
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For holding a soil...

Consider:

How long until you plan to use the soil again for cash crop?

- for short-term (less than 3 months), use buckwheat, oats, tillage radish, sudangrass, turnips, wheat

- for medium-term (3-6 months), use red clover, winter rye, vetch

- for long-term (6 months-several years), use clovers, forage grasses
to loosen hard soils...

- Choose a cover crop with deep tap roots: tillage radish, turnips, clovers
- for permaculture farms, these crops can replace the work of deep tillage machines
To fix nitrogen...

- Choose a cover crop in the legume family: summer alfalfa, clovers, field peas

- Note: these can be used alone or mixed with other crops, for example:
  - mix red clover with winter rye to hold a field over winter
To add organic matter...

- Choose a cover crop with high bio-mass, such as sorghum-sudangrass, winter rye, crimson clover

- Considerations: the larger a crop, the more difficult it is to incorporate
As a weed barrier...

- In open fields... Oats, vetch, clover
- For between rows of crops... undersow with clover, or ryegrass (could require mowing)
To attract beneficial insects

- Choose cover crops with colorful flowers: crimson clover, vetch, turnips
For permaculture and small-scale (less than 1/2 acre) farms, cover crop can be spread easily by hand. Use a quick wrist flick to spread evenly, then rake in...similar to sowing seed for a lawn.
Application...medium-size farm

- For larger plots, a hand-held broadcast seed spreader helps spread seed evenly.
- Then cultipack seeds to ensure good soil-to-seed contact.

http://youtu.be/jjqiN2mwchY
Application... larger farms

Option 1: mount 3-point a drop spreader behind tractor, then cultipack seeds

Option 2: Purchase or rent a commercial seed drill

http://youtu.be/quEp60g29Dg
How to incorporate your cover crop...small scale

- Option 1: Use a hand scythe to cut the crop. Then use a shovel to “plow” it in.
- Option 2: Use a walk-behind tiller to till in the crop (works best on smaller crops)

http://youtu.be/0mqFl86BOck
How to incorporate cover crop... larger farms

Option 1: Use a tractor-mounted tiller to till in the cover crop

Option 2: Use a flair mower to chop the crop into small pieces, then plow under

http://youtu.be/lY7g3CBwnZA
When to plant cover crops... Spring

- Good cover crops for Spring planting... peas, oats, hairy vetch, clover, radish, turnips
When to plant cover crops... Summer

- For summer cover crops... buckwheat, sorghum-sudangrass
When to plant cover crops... Fall/Winter

- Fall/winter cover crops... clovers, winter rye, peas, vetch, radish, turnips
When to incorporate

- “2/3 bloom”... for maximum organic matter, incorporate when 2/3 of the flowers have appeared

- Don’t wait too long! the cover crop will develop seeds and become a weed

- Don’t till too soon! the cover will not contribute a maximum amount of organic matter
Cover Crop Combinations...Spring

- Combining cover crops can give farmers the benefit of multiple crops in one season

- Spring crops to combine: field peas, oats, hairy vetch, clovers
Cover Crop Combinations...Fall

- Crops to combine for a fall sowing: winter rye, field peas, ryegrass, crimson clover, hairy vetch
Self-Review Questions

• What farming objectives can be met with cover crops?
• What cover crops are best for loosening soil?
• What benefits do clover and vetch offer?
Resources

• johnnyseeds.com

• covercropsolutions.com

• www.organicgardening.com/learn-and-grow/cover-crop-basics