

The Ecology Center

PROJECT HOW TO PLANT A COVER CROP

TIP:
Some farmers let cover crops flower before tilling the plants under because the flowers attract beneficial insects. Legumes, however, are always turned into the soil before the plants mature (before they make flowers or seeds) in order to take advantage of the nitrogen release from the roots as the plant dies. If legumes are allowed to reach the flower stage and set seed, most of the nitrogen is used up.

MATERIALS:

Shovel or trowel (or rototiller for very large areas)
Rake
Straw
Cover crop seeds of your choice- usually stores sell legumes, grasses or pre-mixed blends
Water

TIME:

30-45 MINUTES

DIRECTIONS:

1. Pull out the remains of old crops in the bed and compost.
2. Rake the area smooth.
3. Broadcast the seeds. This means scattering them broadly and evenly over the surface of the soil, tossing them in handfuls, at the rate according to the seed package. You can be generous.
4. Rake over gently to cover them.
5. Spread a layer of straw so birds don't eat the seeds.
6. Water every day until plants are at least a few inches tall. Water is as important for cover crops as it is for vegetables.

WHEN TO TILL UNDER:

When your cover crops are fully mature (but before they flower and seed), you will want to "turn under" or "till" them into your soil. You have two options for this:

- You can dig the whole plant into your soil to decompose, which will give your beds extra nourishment if you have time. You will want to wait until most of the stems and leaves have decayed before planting the garden.
- If you want to use the bed sooner, you can mow the stems and leaves, put them in your compost pile, and till under just the lower stems and roots.

HOW TO TILL:

- Dig the cover crop by hand with a shovel or spade (small areas) or with a tiller (large areas).
- Till legumes before they flower. Grasses can go under anytime while they are alive and healthy.