

GREEN MANURES

If, like me, you do not like to see bare soil and want to cover it quickly, then green manure may be the answer. Green manures are plant crops used primarily to fertilize soils and suppress weeds, but they also protect the soil surface from compaction by rain and provide shelter for beneficial insects. They are particularly useful to vegetable gardeners and allotment holders when a patch of land is going to be free of crops for a period of time. They are ideal when sown in the autumn to overwinter when vegetable plots are generally empty, helping to stabilize the soil and preventing soil nutrients from being leached out by winter rain and snow. Green manures are then dug into the ground the following spring and left to decompose, releasing vital nutrients back into the soil and improving soil structure.



There are a number of different green manures that can be used; the most appropriate will depend on soil type and drainage, the length of time the plot will be vacant, whether a nitrogen fixing plant is required and the time of year that the green manure is to be sown, as not all types will survive the winter. A green manure that is hardy and can be sown in August or September and left for 2-3 months to overwinter is Winter Tares (see picture on left). These leguminous plants can also be sown in spring and summer when they have the

capacity to fix nitrogen from the air into their roots. Grazing Rye (see picture below) and Winter Field Beans are also suitable for overwintering and can be sown from August right through to November. Some green manures, such as mustard, are fast growing and can be sown from March to mid-September. They are sometimes used to cover bare patches of soil in the spaces between crops or during intervals between one crop and the next. Since mustard is in the cabbage/brassica family it should not be followed by other brassicas as it could encourage the build up of the disease clubroot. It is often recommended that mustard is used to rid the soil of wireworm following a potato crop. Other green manures, such as Buckwheat and Fenugreek, are not hardy and should only be sown during spring and summer (March to August); both act as good weed suppressors.



Cultivating green manures couldn't be easier and is far less back-breaking than applying animal manures. Seeds are generally sown in rows or broadcast over the soil and raked in. After a couple of months, or when the plants begin to flower, the foliage is chopped down and left to wilt. The plants are then dug into the top 10in (25cm) of soil and allowed to decompose. The plot should then be left for 2 weeks or more before sowing or planting another crop.

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