



Cover Crops

Overview

A cover crop is grasses, legumes, forbs or other herbaceous plants that are established for seasonal cover and conservation purposes.

Cover crops are planted in the late summer or fall around harvest and before spring planting of the following year's crops. Common cover crops used in Wisconsin include winter hardy plants such as barley, rye and wheat. Other less common, but also effective cover crops include oats, spring wheat, hairy vetch, red clover, turnips, canola, radishes, and triticale.

Purpose

This practice may be used to reduce wind or water erosion by establishing cover after a minimal residue crop, to use up excess nutrients in the soil profile, for weed suppression, to provide nutrient for the next crop, to increase carbon sequestration and improve soil structure. Cover crops may be used on all lands needing vegetative cover for natural resource protection and improvement. They are an excellent tool for helping to improve soil health.

Cover Crop Benefits

- Reduce Soil Erosion
- Improve Soil Health
- Increase Soil Porosity and Infiltration
- Weed Fighter
- Improve Soil Microbiology
- Produce/Scavenge Crop Nutrients
- Reduce Soil Compaction
- Improve Nutrient Cycling
- Improve Soil Organic Matter
- Protect Water Quality
- Protect the Environment
- Enhance Wildlife Habitat

Planting Tips

Cover crops can be seeded with drills, broadcast equipment, or aerially applied to get the cover crop started early enough to achieve the desired results. Cover crops are ideal for planting after early harvested crops such as wheat, sweet corn, seed corn, peas or other vegetables, and silage corn.

Selecting Cover Crops

To get the maximum benefit from cover crops, they need to become an integral part of your cropping system. Whether you grow just corn and soybeans or you have a more diverse rotation that includes wheat or vegetable crops, livestock and manure, there are opportunities to include cover crops in your production system. When you select a cover crop, make sure it provides benefits that meet your farming objectives.



Additional Information

For more information about cover crops such as cover species, seeding dates and seeding method, visit your local USDA service center, or visit the Wisconsin NRCS website at [www.wi.nrcs.usda.gov/topics/technical resources](http://www.wi.nrcs.usda.gov/topics/technical_resources)

References

- “Risk Management Fact Sheet—Cover Crops”
<http://www.rma.usda.gov/pubs/rme/fctsht.html>
- Wisconsin NRCS Practice Standard 340 Cover Crops
- Wisconsin Agronomy Technical Note 7, Cover and Green Manure Crops Benefits to Soil Quality
- NRCS Cover Crop Termination Guidelines
- RMA cover crop fact sheet
<http://www.rma.usda.gov/pubs/rme/fctsht.html>
- RMA 2014 crop policies and insurance:
<http://www.rma.usda.gov/policies/2014policy.html>



Mixing cover crops, like rye, clover, and vetch, combine the weed control benefits of grasses with the nitrogen production of legumes.