

DIG THIS by Peg Tillery (for 10-15-08) Cover Crops and Bulb Planting Tips © 2008

If you grow vegetables in your garden or if you have bare land that you're not yet ready to landscape, try putting in some cover crops. September and early October is the time to sow cover crops. Cover crops help hold the soil together and nourish the soil for spring planting. They're often called "green manure" because they serve the same purpose by returning nutrients to the soil.

Local nurseries and feed stores carry cover crop seeds for planting this time of year. You'll usually find information along with the seeds suggesting the quantities to plant and which seeds serve particular purposes. In our area many gardeners plant white or crimson clover, fava beans, vetch, rye and legumes. These crops will germinate in cooler temperatures so you still have time to plant.

They're also very easy to plant. Remove and compost spent debris from the area you'll be cover cropping. Lightly rake up the garden soil and then sprinkle the seeds as evenly as possible all over the area. A little goes a surprisingly long way. Usually one to four ounces of seed (depending on the variety) covers 1000 square feet. Then lightly rake in again. Do not cover the seeds up with additional soil. For some reason the birds don't seem to bother the seeds very much.

Water in if we don't receive rain. Seeds begin sprouting in a few days. The greenery covers the soil fairly fast. If we have a mild winter you may have to whack the vegetation down as early as January or February. This can be done using a lawnmower, weed whacker or scythe. But usually in March through April you'll be chopping the vegetation down, letting it lay on top of the soil for a week or more and then turning it all into the soil with a shovel or spading fork. These nitrogen rich plant parts turn into nearly instant compost in the soil. Some years you'll have to turn the cover crop and soil mixture under a few times. Then, in May and June at planting time your new vegetable seeds and plantings will receive a nitrogen rich start in the garden.

This is also the time to put bulbs in the ground. Local nurseries and retailers have bulbs readily available for us to purchase and plant. For years I'd purchase bulbs and then wait so long into late fall and winter that I'd have to go outside in really chilly weather to plant in December or January. It was not fun. Over the last few years, I've taken the really easy way out. I've planted bulbs in containers in October and November instead. Then in the spring, when the bulbs are done blooming, I remove them from the container and plant them in the ground when the weather is more conducive to being outside lingering in the garden.

When planting bulbs in containers, try the layering method. Bulbs come in all sizes. Usually the bigger the bulb the taller the plant will be. You can layer bulbs into container plantings. Try large yellow daffodils on the bottom layer with tiny grape hyacinth on the top layer. Think parfait using two to four different sized bulbs. Visit your favorite nursery and ask the staff for their favorite bulb combinations.