

Winter Crops that Will Amend your Soil and Save You Time

By Kenny Murakami and Sophie Braccini

We are blessed by a climate that permits winter vegetable gardening. It is not uncommon to be able to supply the table with salad from the garden all winter long. Broccoli, kale and many other edible species also do quite well. However, some gardeners would rather give their kitchen garden a rest during the cool months, or even better, plant crops that will fertilize and amend

This technique is known as "green manuring."

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Green manuring is the planting of crops intended to be cut down and turned in the soil at a later date. There are two types of green manures: legumes and non-

legumes. Legumes, such as clover, beans, peas, vetch, alfalfa, help fix nitrogen from the air, making it available for organic matter breaking up heavy soils. Usually, people plant green manures as a winter cover crop, but you can plant them year round. October is an especially good month for planting the legumes, and it is your best opportunity for peas. You can plant the other plants into November, and a December sowing will still give you some results.

A common winter cover crop consists of a grass and a legume such as winter ryegrass and purple vetch. The ryegrass has 2' roots which help bring nutrients up from deep in the soil, and as an additional local benefit, it grows well even in heavy clays. It



Green manure Alfalfa

helps open up the soil (after the rye is cut down and turned under, those 2" deep roots remain, decomposing and creating vertical, compost filled, cracks in the soil). The vetch will fix nitrogen in the soil and increase its fertility. Most legumes have a symbiotic relationship with a bacterium that lives on their roots and develops the nodules that will fix the air's nitrogen in a way the plant can use. So leave the roots in the soil.

Generally, you want to cut down green manures when they are beginning to bloom but before they mature and set seed. The plants are more succulent, less fibrous

and break down faster in the soil. You can chop up the green manure with a spade or rotary mower, or turn it under with tiller. If you choose fava beans and peas you can eat the edible part before the plant is used for green manuring. The plant might be a little tougher, so you might have to shred it before you work it in your soil.

Planting requirements:

Fava Beans: sew to a rate of 3 to 5 pounds for 1000 square foot, Annual Rye grass: 1 to 2 pounds for 1000 square foot, Purple Vetch: 1 to 3 pounds for 1000 square foot and Peas: 2 to 4 pounds for 1000 square foot.



Kenny Murakami, Moraga Garden Center holding Fava Beans

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