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Digging Deep Under Cover

By Cynthia Brian



Mustard reinvigorates soil and is a great cover crop growing as tall as ten feet. It's edible and pretty, too. Photos Cynthia Brian

white flowering perennial White-flowering Dutch clover spreads by underground runners. It takes two weeks for the clover to break down in the soil.

Crimson Clover: A pretty red flower sprouts in the spring when this hardy annual is planted in the fall. Crimson clover can survive winter freezing to minus ten degrees Fahrenheit. It prefers a neutral PH soil that drains well and does better when sown thickly. The entire plant can be turned under in April, its succulent leaves and stems will decompose in only 10 days leaving the soil nitrogen rich.

Fava Beans: For abundant green manure, plant hardy annual Fava beans. They will grow to four or five feet tall and can be planted as late as November. These hardy plants grow slowly. The tops can be cut down to the base for the compost pile. Till the roots into the soil for best results and richer planting medium.

Mustard: This is one of the most popular cover crops for home gardens, vineyards, and fields. White mustard suppresses soil borne diseases, nematodes, and common root rot. It provides some weed control, especially from rye grass. It adds lots of organic matter when tilled under and the flowers and leaves are edible. Brassica crops are not to be planted following a mustard cover.

Barley: If you have a hillside and are seeking erosion control, barley is a great solution. It's a fast growing grass with fibrous roots. It will die if the weather gets down to 17 degrees.

Fall Planting Ideas

Visit your nursery to find trees and shrubs boasting sensational sunset colors to compliment your fall landscape. Take advantage of the balmy days, chillier evenings, and the warm soil to plant seeds offering up greens, vegetables, and flowers through the beginning of winter. Here's what you'll want to sow now:

- Peas
- Parsley
- Broccoli
- Kale
- Arugula
- Lettuce
- Asian greens
- Spinach
- Chicory
- Chard
- Endive
- Radicchio
- Turnips
- Beets
- Leeks
- Calendulas
- Violas

To grow healthy plants, fruits, and vegetables, we have to have hearty soil. Before we put our gardens to bed for the long winter nap, we want to blanket the beds with nutrient rich cover crops. Replenishing nitrogen, preventing erosion, building soil, increasing water absorption, cover crops are the workhorses of the late autumn and winter landscape.

It is critical to implement the correct combination of cover crops for the right job. Because all plants need nitrogen and all microorganisms depend on it, nitrogen is the most challenging material to maintain in the soil. The best nitrogen fixers are in the Legume family, as they interact with beneficial bacteria in the dirt to enhance the roots. Let's take a look at crops to plant this autumn that will help with preventing weed seeds from germinating while providing a habitat for beneficial insects as well as compost for the garden.

Hairy Vetch: An annual legume that resembles peas with a pretty purple flower, toxic to humans and chickens, vetch is a favorite food of goats and cows and one of the best sources of nitrogen for plants. It sprawls and twines around other specimens. Instead of pulling it out, till it under in spring to use as mulch.

White Dutch Clover: Sown in either spring and fall, the

Cilantro

Bare Root Peonies

Cover the planted patch with straw. Some seeds will germinate quickly followed by dormancy. In our mild climate greens and root vegetables can be harvested throughout the winter. Keep in mind that you can mix the many "foliage" edibles like lettuce, cabbage, or Swiss Chard amongst your fall ornamentals. Look for those that add color, interesting leaf shapes, varying sizes, and form. For a bigger design impact, plant in swaths. Thin when the plants are a few inches high, and add the sprouts to your dinner plate.

Engage your children in garden based learning to spark their curiosity and grow their confidence with practical skills they will use forever. In a large container at least 18 inches deep, let your kids plant a slice from their favorite red, golden, or brown potato with two or three eyes up in a manure rich soil. Leaves will sprout, the plant will flower, and about 10 weeks later the potatoes are ready to be harvested. In most areas, tubers are planted in spring, but I plant them all year 'round with continued success as long as I protect them from frost or super cold weather. Your children will love eating their own baked potato or making fries.

Choose bulbs that will be deer and rodent resistant to plant towards the end of the month or any time in November for continuous spring color without the nibbling. Besides daffodils, consider alliums, snowdrops, bluebells, checkered lilies, and fritillaria.

Without good soil, we'll never achieve a healthy, beautiful landscape. Just as we lather creams on our bodies to moisturize our skin to keep it young, our soil needs nutrients to feed the seeds. Cover crops are the anti-aging replenishing regimen that keep our gardens growing and glowing year after year. As Franklin D. Roosevelt commented: "The nation that destroys its soil destroys itself." Take care of nature's most important organ-its earth and it will reward you a hundred fold.

Fall forward with fabulous foliage!

Cynthia Brian's Gardening Guide for October

"All my hurts, my garden spade can heal." Ralph Waldo Emerson

A season of great beauty, autumn is the best time of the year for planting and it is a busy time for gardeners. Raking leaves, deadheading perennials, cleaning out flowerbeds, storing patio furniture, fall provides us with plenty of exercise outdoors in the fresh air. October has historically been a notorious month for fires and earthquakes, thus it is imperative to revisit our family emergency plans. And let's not forget to harvest our ghoulish gourds and decorate our steps with fierce pumpkins for a haunting Halloween to awaken the child within us all.

- CLEAR a defensible space around the perimeter of your home and develop an evacuation plan in case of a wildfire. October is notorious for being a fire month.

Create an emergency supply list, especially if you live at the top of a canyon as fire normally runs uphill. For more information visit the Cal Fire site at <http://www.fire.ca.gov/>.

- CHOOSE fire resistant plants when considering your landscaping needs. Most fire resistant specimens are also drought resistant, a good pick to help conserve water.

- INFUSE vinegar with the final fresh picked fruits and herbs of this season in preparation for holiday gifts.

- HAND-PICK bugs off plants as a first defense, apply insecticidal soap for harder to kill pests.

- CONTROL next year's weeds with a vinegar based herbicide or corn meal gluten as a pre-emergent.

- GROW swaths of late season interest, especially grasses.

- BRANCH out with fiery leaves of gold, russet, bronze, zinfandel, and sienna hued arrangements for festive fall centerpieces.

- PICK your remaining green tomatoes as soon as temperatures start dropping. Saut? with olive oil and garlic for a tangy, tasty treat of famous fried green tomatoes.

- SEEK sanctuary in your garden by placing a bench in a tranquil, soothing location where you can watch birds, butterflies, and bees be busy. A gently engaging experience, green spaces revitalize people physically, psychologically, and emotionally.

- SPROUT seeds of arugula, mesclun, Asian lettuces, and other gourmet greens in a large container by your kitchen for easy pinching and eating throughout autumn.

- OVER-SEED bare spots in lawns at the first drops of rain, then fertilize with an organic product.

- PUNCH up the drama in your landscape with containers planted with fall colored succulents and annuals available now in garden centers.

- PREVENT garden injuries by stretching before going out to dig, and always bend from the knees, not the back.

- DIVIDE, move, re-plant deer resistant herbaceous peonies in well draining, loaming soil.

- STOP BY the Be the Star You Are!(r) Express Yourself!(tm) booth at the Pear and Wine Festival in Moraga on September 29 from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. to meet me and

writers of Teen Scene, be on the radio and receive free, fresh potpourri; sponsored by the Lamorinda Weekly.

- ROOT cuttings from Jacobinia for a showy next season fall performance.

- PROBLEMS with skunks, yellow jackets, or mosquitoes? Call Contra Costa Vector Control for assistance, removal, and extermination at (925) 685-9301. Sorry, they don't eradicate rats but will give you tips on how to keep your property rodent resistant.

- PLANT alliums and daffodils towards the end of the month to fill the gap between the tulip and peony spring blooms. Stagger plantings of narcissus through January for a long season of beauty.

- VISIT the local farmer's markets for the final fresh fruits and vegetables of the year. Pick up gourds, pumpkins, and fall decorations that will last through Thanksgiving.
- RAKE your fallen leaves and grass clippings to add rich nutrients to the soil. Build your own bin or buy one at selected retailers. Mowing the leaves helps them decompose faster.
- COVER fences or dress up railings by planting clematis, a super easy twining vine with fragrance and flowers.
- KEEP the birds happy in your garden by continuing to provide food, water, and shelter. Your hospitality will be rewarded.
- HARVEST your potatoes as soon as the leaves dry and curl. Dig gently to not bruise the tubers. Leave the tiniest ones to mature longer.
- EXPERIENCE and enjoy a haunted, happy Halloween.

See you on September 29th in Moraga at the Pear and Wine Festival. Wishing you Halloween Dreams of goblins, ghosts, and gourds!

Happy Gardening to You!

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I am available as a speaker, designer, and consultant.



Final harvest of squash, cucumbers, eggplant, peppers, and tomatoes-plenty for a fall festivity.



Clematis shines as it twines with forget-me not and geranium along a fence. Photos Cynthia Brian



It's not fall without pumpkins and ghoulish gourds! If you don't grow them, find them at the farmers' markets.



Cynthia's freshly harvested red potatoes. Easy to plant and grow. Delicious and nutritious. A great project for kids!

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[back](#)

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