

## Digging Deep with Cynthia Brian

# Under Cover

By Cynthia Brian

*“What I enjoy is not the fruits alone, but I also enjoy the soil itself, its nature, and its power.” Cicero*



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

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 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.

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