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Ask Cynthia Brian-Vetch Reader's Request



Vetch Photo Cynthia Brian

Hi Cynthia:

I found vetch in my garden (don't know how it got there) but would like to know how I can spread it to more places? Do I wait for seeds or should I dig some up and move? Thanks.

Andy, Moraga

Hi Andy:

Grown for green manure and part of the pea family, vetch is a perennial or annual herb with spreading, creeping stems that can reach two to twelve feet in length. It is used mainly on farms to add nitrogen to the soil. Vetch is toxic to humans and non-ruminants if consumed but goats love it.

Most likely birds brought seeds into your garden last summer allowing for vigorous spring eruptions. There are over 150 species of vetch with 25 native to the United States. The most common in our area are crown (not a true vetch) and hairy vetch, both native to Europe or western Asia. You can easily transplant vetch from one area to another by first preparing the area where you want the vetch to grow by tilling the soil four to six inches deep. Dig

out the vetch (roots are shallow) and transplant where you want it, spacing plants at least two feet apart if you are seeking full coverage. Even if you sever a few roots, the plant will recover within two weeks with regular watering as vetch is hardy and acclimates easily to new locations. Vetch prefers well-drained soils with PH of 6 or 7, however, it seems to do fine in our clay. Basically, vetch is not picky. If you want to buy vetch seeds, your best bet is through agricultural or pasture catalogues such as <http://www.johnnyseeds.com>. Prices vary but expect to pay around \$5 per 1/4 pound.

You can also wait for the seeds to pod in July or August. Don't harvest as they don't mature uniformly, but allow them to shatter and scatter on their own. This cover crop will grow slowly in the fall, but develop strong roots that continue through winter until spring sprouting and blooming. Vetch suppresses other weeds, but beware. Although it contributes maximum amounts of nitrogen as a first class soil conditioner, you need to dig it into the earth to reap the benefits. As a weed itself, if left to grow without tilling, it will twine like a vine around your other plants, strangling and smothering them.

For this reason, if you want your flowers and vegetables to be the showcase of your garden, consider vetch as a cover crop only for your fertilizer needs, not as an individual specimen. And don't eat it unless you are a goat!

Happy Gardening!

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Cynthia Brian

The Goddess Gardener

Cynthia@GoddessGardener.com

www.GoddessGardener.com

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

Cynthia will answer one or more questions every other issue as space allows. Email your comments or questions to Cynthia@GoddessGardener.com

Reach the reporter at: info@lamorindaweekly.com

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