

Green Manures

What are green manures?

Green manures are plants you can grow in vegetable beds that you aren't using, to improve the soil. If you are growing food organically you might leave vegetable bed fallow as part of a rotation scheme, or not be growing vegetables over the winter.



How do green manures improve the soil?

Green manures can suppress weeds through their dense leafy cover, add fertility (e.g. nitrogen) to the soil, improve its structure, and keep the soil together by protecting it from heavy rain in winter and the drying effects of sun and wind in summer. Lots of green manures like clovers (above) and phacelia (below) are also great for attracting beneficial pollinating insects to the garden.

How do I use green manures?

Sow your chosen green manure plants over the area to be improved. Most green manures can pretty much be left to look after themselves. When you are ready to use the bed for vegetable growing again, the green manure is cut and dug back into the soil (or leave them on the surface to let the worms do the work!) This should be done a few weeks before you want to plant a new crop in the bed.



Some green manures you can try for different situations:

Crimson or red clover: this can provide long term cover, is nitrogen fixing, and leafy plants suppress weeds.

Alfalfa: great all-round fertiliser, prefers drier soils (not acid), deep roots break up soil, can be grown quickly for short term 2-3 months or left to overwinter.

Field beans: good for overwintering, will break up compacted soil and add nitrogen through root nodules.

Caliente mustard: short term cover (2-5 months) this plant helps remove soil-borne pests and diseases by releasing natural gasses (biofumigant).

Yellow trefoil: a low growing plant that can be grown between rows of taller plants with open canopies like beans or sweetcorn. Fixes nitrogen and suppresses weed, can be grown for 3-12months.

Mustard: short term cover (1-2 months) makes large amounts of organic matter which improves soil texture and water retention, thrives on most soils.

Other green manures you could look into include buckwheat, fenugreek, Italian ryegrass, lupins, winter tares, phacelia and fodder radish. Green manure seed mixes for spring or winter or general are also available.

