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Crops that have it covered during winter

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By Alex Féthière

Photo in the print edition: Garlic and cover crops keep the soil toned over the wet dark winter. (Journal photo by Alex Féthière)

The season for sowing cover crops is ending, but if it stays warm for a couple more weeks it's not too late to get them in the ground. After last week's frost, we have a little mild weather yet to condition our cultivable soil and protect it from rain.

Where I'm not covercropping I'm still rushing in a bit of garlic: I have only ever planted garlic in fall, because I love the scapes that are guaranteed by the early development that fall planting permits. Garlic and cover crops keep the soil toned over the wet dark winter.

Aristotle famously said that nature abhors a vacuum. Seeds and rootlets already have designs on any bare ground we leave. Cover crops, by occupying and excluding, help retain that resource for our own use come spring. For best results, use soil testing services like A&L Western Agricultural Labs to tailor your cover crops for specific nutrient improvements.

Inhabiting roots clutch soil and sprout leaves that provide canopy. Whether you're planting in raised beds or directly in-ground, living umbrellas help protect the soil from the rains that compact it, crust it and erode it. This is particularly true on slopes.

Capillary and tap roots help condition soil, keeping it loose with their invaluable organic matter. They crack the soil and keep it friable over winter, then decay after sufficient injury. Some, like crimson clover, cover it quickly, hold it comprehensively, and break down quickly in spring when hoed or tilled in. (Because it retains more humus, I prefer the no-till method of mowing and light hoeing.) Crimson clover produces nitrogen and is easier to till and control than white or red, which can get away and become weedy.

Daikon radish, punching channels up to 20" into the soil and subsoil, mines minerals from beneath the topsoil. Its large tubers improve drainage if left to decay. This is the lore on it, which I have not experienced. I have pulled a few specimens that bulbed well for radish kimchi.

Although daikon works well in a blend with buckwheat and crimson clover — "Happy Hen" blend has been reseeding and building a friend's soil and enriching his chickens for a couple of years now — buckwheat is not frost hardy, and the short days of fall trick it into flowering early if sown too late. The Takane Ruby Buckwheat I planted in August may be lovely, but it's stunted.

For rapid-spreading roots that fix nitrogen and also put on considerable aerial growth for composting or tilling in, small-seeded fava beans are ideal. Their stalks yield more readily to tillers than larger favas or peas, so I'm hoping to avoid tilling by mowing them instead. The greens are also tasty in salad whether favas are planted in fall or spring, and can survive a couple of human grazings before being tilled in.

Speaking of human grazing, I'm experimenting with Austrian winter peas for that very reason: pea shoots! No cover crop I know of provides such biomass along with an edible winter green. I only hope that the tiller I have will be capable of turning its considerable bulk under in spring to become humus.

Growing vegetables depletes this humus, and replenishing it with decaying roots, stems and leaves makes a small contribution that can be enhanced by other sustainable measures, like composting and leaf mold.

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