



## **USING COVER CROPS**

By Sue McDavid

UCCE El Dorado County Master Gardener

This time of year many home gardeners feel they can sit back and rest, but the garden still needs some attention. One final effort can make a big difference and that is cover cropping; even small gardens will benefit from the use of cover crops or "green manures." Tilling, weeding, planting, harvesting and foot traffic in most home gardens tend to destroy soil structure, and planting cover crops is an easy way to reinvigorate the soil and improve subsequent plant growth. Cover crops are planted in otherwise bare garden areas and are worked into the soil after they grow instead of being eaten. They suppress perennial and winter annual weed growth and add organic matter when turned over into the soil. Their root systems also provide organic matter and open passageways that help improve air and water movement in the soil. The bottom line -- cover cropping is one of the building blocks of sustainable gardening.

Success in growing cover crops requires raking the garden area and removing debris and large stones. Broadcast the cover crop seed and lightly rake over it again, then water in well. It is a good idea to cover the seed with a fine layer of compost or other organic material to keep birds and turkeys from eating it or scattering it around. Keep the area moist if there are no fall rains predicted. Raised garden beds that have been used for summer vegetables are a good area to sow cover crops in, and will provide nutrients for next year's crop.

In the spring, about six weeks before planting vegetables or ornamentals, cut the cover crop down as close to the soil surface as possible and throw those cuttings in the compost pile. Cover the area with about a two to three inch layer of organic material (compost, shredded leaves, etc.) and let it sit until you are ready to plant. The organic material should suppress any further growth and not tilling the cover crop in will keep soil disturbance to a minimum. After planting, no further fertilization should be necessary and any plantings should flourish.

What cover crop seed should be used? Legumes are one and include a wide variety of plants such as beans, peas and clovers which are valued as cover crops because they transfer nitrogen

from the air to the soil for use by subsequent crops, reduce or prevent erosion, add organic matter to the soil and attract beneficial insects.

Red clover loosens the soil, supplies nitrogen to the soil, acts as a soil builder and weed suppressor, and attracts pollinating insects.

Hairy vetch is considered a top nitrogen contributor because of its ability to make vigorous roots that supply nitrogen deep into the soil. It also serves as a weed suppressor, a soil conditioner and erosion controller.

This article just touches on a few aspects of cover cropping, but more information can be found on the Agricultural Sustainability Institute at UC Davis website at <http://www.sarep.ucdavis.edu/covercrop/res/cover-crop-publications/selecting-the-right-cover-crop-gives-multiple-benefits>.

If you're thinking about planting some new roses in 2014, plan to attend this Saturday's Nov 2nd free Master Gardener class on Selection and Care of Roses. The new bareroot stock will be available in local nurseries in December or January, and this class will provide timely advice on selection, planting and maintaining your new shrubs. Join Master Gardener Eve Keener for in-depth instruction in this topic. Class is from 9:00 a.m. to noon at the Government Center Hearing Room, 2850 Fairlane Court, in Placerville.

Master Gardeners are available to answer home gardening questions Tuesday through Friday, 9 a.m. to noon, by calling [\(530\) 621-5512](tel:5306215512). Walk-ins are welcome at our office, located at 311 Fair Lane in Placerville. For more information about our public education classes and activities, go to our Master Gardener website at [http://ucanr.edu/sites/EDC\\_Master\\_Gardeners/](http://ucanr.edu/sites/EDC_Master_Gardeners/). Sign up to receive our online notices and e-newsletter at <http://ucanr.edu/mgenews/>. You can also find us on Facebook.