

# Cover Crop Planting Guide

## Seed preparation:

- If your seed includes a legume (for example, crimson clover or hairy vetch), **mix the seed in a bucket with an appropriate *inoculant*** -- a powder containing the specific *Rhizobia* bacteria that will live in the legume roots and fix nitrogen. **Moisten the seed** so the inoculant will stick. Inoculated seed should be planted right away!

*For more information on legume inoculation, see:*

Grossman, J.M. 2015. Legume inoculation for organic farming systems.

<http://www.extension.org/pages/64401/legume-inoculation-for-organic-farming-systems>

Drinkwater, L. E. 2011. It's elemental: How legumes bridge the nitrogen gap.

<http://www.nofa.org/tnf/Summer2011B.pdf>

## Site preparation and Planting:

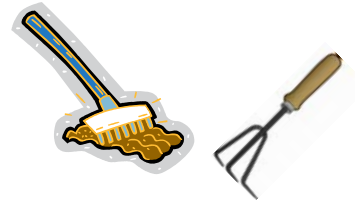
1. **Clean** your plot, to provide space and light for your cover crop.

- ✓ Remove weeds & crop residues
- ✓ Stake and prune crops that are still producing



2. **Lightly cultivate** the soil to create a fine seedbed.

- ✓ If you are planting an empty garden bed, use a **garden rake**.
- ✓ If you are seeding beneath and between crops, use a **hand-weeding fork**.



3. **Broadcast** the seed evenly and gently rake in.

- ✓ About 1 cup of seed for an 8' x 4' bed (32 ft<sup>2</sup>) is a generous seeding rate that will give excellent weed suppression.



4. **COVER** newly planted seed with row cover, to protect it from birds. Remove the row cover when the plants are established.

**\*\*\* PLEASE care for and SAVE your row cover! \*\*\***

This is expensive material, and is VERY useful to provide early-season insect protection to crops, and bird protection for future cover crop plantings.



<http://www.hudsonvalleybackyardfarm.com/2011/07/page/2/>

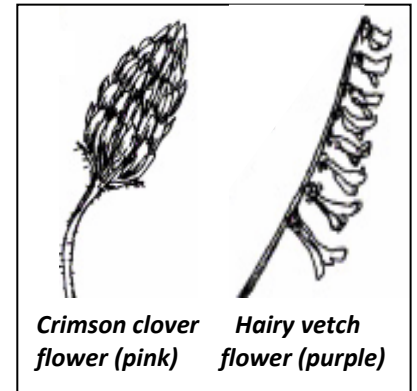
# Managing your Over-wintering Cover Crops in Spring

So you planted an over-wintering cover crop last fall and now you have a beautiful stand of crimson clover, vetch, rye, or a mixture! Here are some tips as you prepare beds for planting vegetables.

## Wait for legumes to flower

Legumes like clover and vetch should be killed while in full bloom, but before they set seed. Here's why:

- **Soil quality and fertility.** Allowing cover crops to grow until flowering maximizes their contributions to soil organic matter and nitrogen. Most nitrogen fixation happens during *spring* growth!
- **Prevent weed problems.** Legumes that are cut before they flower may regrow, and become weeds among your veggies! ☹️



## To Dig or Not to Dig? : Cut-and Mulch or Dig In your cover crop

When the time comes to cut down your cover crop, you have two options:

- **Cut-and-Mulch:** Chop the shoots down to ground level using hedge shears or a small sickle, and leave them as mulch on the soil surface. **DO NOT pull up the plants** – letting the roots decompose in place aerates the soil and preserves organic matter.
  - Cut-and mulch before **transplanted crops** (tomatoes, zucchini, etc.).
  - Advantages: Best for soil quality (reduces disturbance); mulch conserves moisture & keeps down weeds; less labor
  - Disadvantages: You **MUST** wait until the cover crop is flowering!
- **Digging In:** Use a shovel to chop the shoots and work them into the top 3-5 inches of the soil.
  - Dig in cover crops for a **fine seedbed** (for small-seeded crops, like carrots).
  - Advantages: Best for rapid release of nitrogen from the cover crop
  - Disadvantages: Less weed control than cut-and-mulch; lots of work!



## Preparing beds for planting vegetables

- **If you Cut-and-Mulch:** You can transplant right away... just push apart the cover crop mulch, leaving space around the transplants.
- **If you Dig In:** Wait **at least 10 days**, then check the seedbed. If there are clumps of plant material, wait a little longer before planting seeds. Grasses (e.g., wheat, rye) may take longer than legumes (e.g., clover, vetch). Allowing enough time for the cover crop to break down in the soil is important to replenish soil water and nutrients before planting vegetable crops.