

Cover Crops

Why should I plant cover crops?

Cover crops can offer many benefits to your cash crop management plan, whether you farm a typical corn, soybeans and wheat rotation, or grow speciality crops. Depending upon the cover crop selected and how it is used, the functions cover crops can provide are:

- Nitrogen source
- Nitrogen scavenger
- Soil builder, subsoil loosener, topsoil loosener
- Erosion preventer, lasting residue
- Weed fighter
- Recycle nutrients
- Improve water quality
- Conserve soil moisture

Getting started in cover crops

Consider your crop rotation and where the cover crops may fit. The easiest place to incorporate cover crops is after an early harvested crop like winter wheat, cucumbers, peas or snap beans. Frost seeding clover into winter wheat in the spring is a cost efficient cover crop that offers a good payback in terms of a nitrogen credit to the following corn crop. If you have not had good establishment in the past, consider planting a cover crop immediately after wheat harvest.

Begin simply with cover crops. Start with cover crops that are single species or very simple mixtures involving just two or three species. Cover crops that will die over winter like radish and oats are best. Rye can make a very good cover crop as well, but requires careful attention to timing of control in the spring. Once you have some experience, consider some of the more extensive cover crop mixtures. These offer further benefits in terms of adding crop diversity to your rotation.

How do cover crops work?

Cover crops have been used in agriculture for hundreds of years – just in different forms. Pasture and hay crops were once a staple across southern Ontario. This was dictated by the type of livestock oriented farming. With the shift of cropping practices in the Lower Thames Valley watershed to a cash crop rotation of corn and soybeans, the amount of pasture and hay land has drastically decreased over the years. This has increased the number of acres which lie bare during the winter months, with no vegetated coverage.

The planting of cover crops into your cash crop management plan has the potential to offer vegetated coverage on your farm during the winter months when the erosive potential is high. What does that mean for you? Investing money in planting a cover crop can help keep your soil and nutrients on your farm, as the root systems help to hold soil in place.

What about Winter Wheat?

The planting of winter wheat offers a great opportunity for a harvestable cover crop. Soil and environmental benefits are well documented when adding winter wheat into a crop rotation. If you include winter wheat into your rotation along with cover crops, you will help to improve your soil.



A rye cover crop after a harvest of processing sweet corn, stabilizes and protects the soil, takes up any residual nitrogen and provides grazing possibilities.

What cost-share programs are available?

In an effort to improve the quality of our environment, the Lower Thames Valley Conservation Authority (LTVCA) has developed a comprehensive Agricultural Improvement Fund (AIF) to improve Chatham-Kent, Elgin, Essex and Middlesex County's soil, air and water by providing grants for stewardship projects. Grants are available to qualifying farmers and landowners to plant cover crops. Please be sure to contact the LTVCA office to see if you are eligible to apply for a cost-share grant: P 519-354-7310.

For more information and help deciding what cover crop is right for you click this link <http://decision-tool.incovercrops.ca/> or talk to your local crop input supplier.

Testimonial



"Our focus as a Farming business is focused 100% on Soil Health. It has been the underlying productivity of our soil that has been the foundation of our success. I view cover crops as a valuable tool to protect this precious resource, to ensure productivity for future generations. The ability to use plants to make soil more productive and more resilient is our objective. Healthy soil is an ideal filter for ground source water. Using cover crops helps to increase water holding capacity and increase soil porosity." - Blake Vince

What does it mean for my farm business?

Cover crops can provide a number of benefits to your farm practice. It is important to understand that one type of cover crop will not meet all the needs or expectation you have for your farm. In order to get the greatest value out of planting cover crops it is essential to know what you want cover crops to do to improve your farm.

References

Midwest Cover Crop Council. Midwest Cover Crops Field Guide. 2014

Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs. Cover Crops. Adam Hayes, Ted Taylor, Anne Verhallen. 2011

Ontario Soil & Crop Improvement Association, Species at Risk, Farm Incentive Program, SARFIP 2013-2014.

Van Erd, Laura, University of Guelph-Ridgetown

Verhallen, Anne, Soil Management Specialist, Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs



Oats are a good choice when starting in cover crops. They establish easily and will winterkill.



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