Midwest Cover Crops Council

MCCC-GS1

Getting Started with Cover Crops:
Cover Crop FAQs

To select county-specific seeding windows and determine seeding rates, use the MCCC Decision Tool: covercroptool.midwestcovercrops.org.

What are the most common cover crops for getting started?

Cereal rye is easily the most common cover crop.

Oats (sometimes mixed with radish) are the most common winter-killed cover crop.

- Radish requires an early seeding date and should not be planted alone.

What are some overwintering options instead of cereal rye?

Winter wheat, winter barley, or winter triticale.

- Winter barley may have limited winter survival depending on your location in the Midwest.

Which cover crop species reliably winter-kill?

Oats and radish.

- For most other cover crop species, winter survival will depend on location, variety, and planting date.









Which cover crops work well ahead of a corn crop?

A crop of oats mixed with either radish or hairy vetch would work well. In some areas, crimson clover would be another option to mix with oats.

- Cereal rye is generally not recommended before corn because, as an overwintering grass, it can tie up nitrogen and/or create a green bridge for corn pests.

Which cover crop works well ahead of a soybean crop?

Cereal rye is a great fit before soybean.

Which cover crop works well after a wheat crop?

One low-maintenance mixture is oats and radish.

- A late-summer harvest date allows for earlier cover crop planting; with more time for a cover crop to grow before frost, there are more options for cover crops species or mixes. Check state-specific recommendations on the MCCC Decision Tool, covercroptool.midwestcovercrops.org.

What is a good way to add diversity to my cover crop?

Start simple. Add a brassica or a legume to a small grain.

- If planting after a late-summer-harvested cash crop or planting into a standing crop, add radish to a mix with oats. If planting after a fall-harvested cash crop, growing days before a killing frost may limit your mixture options to a more cold-tolerant brassica such as rapeseed or winter camelina.

Which cover crop is most winter hardy, even in northern climates?

Cereal rye.

- Cereal rye can germinate at soil temperatures down to 34°F and can survive at temperatures as low as -30°F. Because cereal rye grows quickly in the spring and has the potential to accumulate a lot of biomass, termination is typically recommended at 6–12 inches of growth or at least 7–14 days prior to cash crop planting for growers who are new to cover crops.

How late is too late to plant oats, radish, and clover?

Ideally these species would be planted by mid- to late September, depending on your location.

- For county-specific planting windows, use the Midwest Cover Crops Council Cover Crop Decision Tool, covercroptool.midwestcovercrops.org.

Why is it risky to plant cereal rye before corn?

Cereal rye is generally not recommended before corn because, as an overwintering grass, it can immobilize nitrogen, compete for water, and/or create a green bridge for corn pests.

Why would I use a grass cover crop?

Grasses can help reduce erosion, suppress weeds, capture nutrients, and break up compaction.

- The common grass cover crops are small grains such as cereal rye, oats, wheat, barley, and triticale. Winter-hardy grasses tend to grow slowly in the fall and quickly in the spring, helping reduce winter and spring erosion. Oats, which tend to winter-kill, grow quickly in the fall and help reduce fall and winter erosion.

Why would I use a legume cover crop?

Legumes fix atmospheric nitrogen, which can add nitrogen to the soil if they are allowed time for adequate growth. Legumes can provide pollinator food/habitat, especially when allowed to flower.

- The common legume cover crops are hairy vetch and clovers such as red, crimson, balansa, and white clover. Different legumes require different seeding timing and vary in their winter hardiness.

Why would I use a brassica cover crop?

Brassicas scavenge nutrients and release them quickly, and they have taproots that can help break up compaction. Brassicas can also provide pollinator food/habitat, especially when allowed to flower.

- The common brassica cover crops are radish, turnip, and rapeseed.

The Midwest Cover Crops Council (www.midwestcovercrops.org) aims to facilitate widespread adoption of cover crops throughout the Midwest by providing educational/outreach resources and programs, conducting new research, and communicating about cover crops to the public.






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