

Oct 2022

- **I want to leave one of my large vegetable beds 'vacant' for now to give it a rest. What is the best way to do this?**

If I understand this correctly, you want to give the bed a rest but don't leave it empty! By leaving soil empty you run the risk of weed seeds blowing in, topsoil blowing or washing away, and you waste the space and time that things could be working under the ground.

The easiest thing to protect your beds in fall and improve soil structure is to cover them with 6"/15 cm of leaves. You can rake up your own leaves, obtain them from your neighbours or even pick up stockpiled leaves (they tend to be more of a mulch and more decomposed at certain times of year) from the municipal parks.

<https://www.saanich.ca/EN/main/community/utilities-garbage/garbage-organics-recycling/leaf-collection-program.html>

Take your bins or bags and a shovel/gloves/pitch fork and go grab your own. Wet leaves can go directly on your beds. Dry leaves can be stockpiled for later in the season to top up. Think of the forests and how the leaves cycle through and decompose. The cycle just keeps going.

Instead of leaving a bed fallow, use a cover crop or green manure to: protect the soil, loosen the soil, increase organic matter, structure, drainage and aeration. Cover crops also provide a place to overwinter insects, when planting legumes and beans and peas they will fix nitrogen to the soil and this is a fabulous thing.

Cover crops add nitrogen to the soil. Cover crops are planted late summer so that the seeds germinate and the crop starts to grow. If you add the seed too late, the cooler weather will keep any growth from happening. Manure can also add nitrogen to the soil but here in the PNW it should not be added in the fall as during the rainy season it washes away from the garden. Some cover crops can handle colder temperatures. In Alberta, I used tillage radish as it could handle cold, sent down a long tap root to draw up the nutrients deep in the earth, and had a pretty white/pinky flower which fed pollinators. I have tillage radish still blooming now (mid October) from an earlier planting. Other cover crops also have flowers which feed the pollinators.

Most times, with fall sown cover crops you will want to till/turn the crop under before it goes to seed or before the roots get too established. Otherwise it is too hard to dig and replant.

Linda Gilkeson, the veggie garden guru and author of Backyard Bounty, warns people NOT to plant fall rye as a cover crop. She is also a bug expert and has found that this crop, while a great grower, can have a problem with wire worm infestation. Wireworms are tiny but attack and make holes in root crops- carrots, beets, onions.

In the early spring of 2021, I threw/scattered some old pea seeds in my flowerbeds. I figured at least I wouldn't be wasting time with old seeds and poor germination rates for my pea crop or at best they might grow and produce peas and in the meantime they would help to fix nitrogen to the soil. As peas like cool weather, they were off to a great start and I had edible peas much earlier than any I planted in marked rows with the intention of eating.

If it is too late, intimidating or costly for fall cover crops, then you still have the option to mulch with leaves which are free and plentiful.

Good luck and happy gardening!

Sources:

<https://www.almanac.com/video/how-plant-cover-crops-enrich-soil-winter>

<https://www.westcoastseeds.com/blogs/garden-wisdom/green-manure-cover-crops>

<https://www.bordenmercantile.com/grass-seed>

<https://www.integritysalesanddistributors.ca/landscaping--gardening-supplies/grass-seed>

Herriot, C. The Zero Mile Diet A year Round Guide to Growing Organic Food p 240-241 Green Manures- Winter and Summer.

<http://www.lindagilkeson.ca/gardening-pdf/Winter%20Gardening%202022%20-%20October%202.pdf>