

Green Manures

Green manures are generally under-used, yet they are easy, cheap and have a number of benefits. First, they are a great way to hold nutrients in the soil that would [wash](#) out over winter. Nutrients that would leach from the soil are held onto for the spring crops. With light sandy soils, where there would be little benefit to winter digging, a green manure is ideal. Secondly, they suppress weed growth. Two plants cannot grow in the same place and a green manure will prevent weeds from getting a hold. The third benefit is that green manures improve the soil structure and add humus. The roots keep the soil friable as well as drawing up minerals and nutrients that would be otherwise wasted.

As well as holding nutrients in the soil, some green manures have the ability to fix nitrogen from the air. This ability to fix nitrogen means that the plants are actually providing you with fertiliser. Two green manures are worthy of special mention, mustard and French beans.

After you lift potatoes, planting agricultural mustard will help to reduce eelworm by hardening their cysts and preventing them from emerging on time, confusing their breeding cycle. Be careful though if you have club root because mustard is a brassica and mustard green manure can further spread the disease.

The second is a plant not normally considered as a green manure, French beans. They grow quickly and being legumes they fix nitrogen. The seeds are large enough to handle easily and cheap enough to use as a green manure. Whenever you have cleared a crop and will have some vacant soil for a few weeks, densely sow some French beans. If plans go wrong and the space isn't required you can harvest the beans. Rather than digging the French beans in, you can just use them as a valuable compost material if you prefer.

To overwinter sow field beans, winter tares or Hungarian grazing rye. For early and mid season sowings; alfalfa, buckwheat, crimson clover or annual ryegrass are good options. Usually when ready the green manure is cut and allowed to wilt for a few days before being dug in to the soil. A pair of shears is useful for this. The plants quickly decay and release their nutrients as well as adding humus into the soil.

Know Your Soil

read instructions, sow thinly, plant everything well apart, and weed and water religiously

When starting a new allotment there are many choices you have to make, often with insufficient information. First, in order to choose the right crops you need to know what your soil is suited to...

The most daunting dilemma for a new allotment holder is what needs doing and when. It can all seem so confusing. But do not panic. Ask your surrounding allotmenters and they will guide you, as almost everyone loves to be asked for their advice. And if you cannot ask then copy; whatever is growing well for them is worth trying. Divide your plot up into beds with a small path between each, and keep a record, say, a page for each in a book, then you can rotate different crops on each bed over the years ahead, helping to maintain fertility and prevent pests and diseases from building up.

But do not take on too much. Gardening can be physically demanding. If you have a large plot then conventionally cultivate only about half or so this year. Cover the other half with layers of newspaper and cardboard to kill the weeds by excluding their light. If any come through, put more newspapers on top. Lay the sheets thickly with wide overlaps and set them so that rain running downhill runs underneath. Use bricks and stones to hold down the sheets. This area is not going to be wasted, as you can cut holes through the layers and plant pumpkin, squash, marrow, courgette or ridge cucumber plants into the soil underneath in mid-May. You can also grow tomatoes this way, but they need a sheltered sunny spot to do well - and may need netting to stop the birds stealing the fruit. It is also possible to grow sweetcorn, cabbage, cauliflower, calabrese, broccoli and Brussels sprouts by this method, saving much tedious digging, weeding and watering.



Green Manures

These are crops you grow when the soil is unused in winter to make loads of compost material. Unfortunately what has been sold to gardeners for years are tares, vetches, clovers and other perfidious weeds which may grow well and produce a mass of material but are tough and difficult to remove or incorporate. They were well suited to farmers with 100hp ploughs but are hard work for the allotmenteer. Instead, I recommend Miner's lettuce, (Claytonia/Montia perfoliata) and Lamb's lettuce (Valerianella locusta), which are not only easy to remove or dig in but edible and tasty, too. Poached-egg plant (Limnanthes douglasii) is another good green manure; it is not edible but attracts a lot of beneficial insects.

.Deterring pests

Simply by planting a row of strong-smelling plants next to a row of vulnerable vegetables, you can ward off many pests (such as carrot root fly, white fly and aphids). Carrot root fly can smell carrots from up to a mile away. But if you plant alliums (such as leeks, onions or garlic) near your carrots, this masks their sweet, carrot-like smell. Alliums also deter slugs. So try growing salad leaf crops (such as lettuce and rocket) amongst them. Further, alliums prevent fungal infections. So a row of onions planted near strawberries helps to prevent the strawberries from developing mould.

Basil and marigolds act as a natural insect repellent when planted amongst tomatoes, helping to ward off whitefly. Similarly, a row of nasturtiums planted amongst beans attracts aphids away from your crop. This is because nasturtiums are more appealing to aphids than beans, so the pests will always go for their favoured treat if there's the option to do so.

The following plants help deter pests from your crop:

- **Basil** – wards off whitefly when planted amongst tomatoes
- **Nasturtium** – attracts aphids away from beans
- **Alliums** – confuse carrot fly and protect against slug damage
- **Lavender** – confuses pests
- **Nettles** – attract cabbage white butterflies, keeping them away from brassica crops

Summary

- Use strong-smelling vegetables such as alliums (onions and garlic) and herbs (rosemary and basil) to confuse pests and prevent them from attacking your crop
- Attract beneficial insects to your vegetable plot by planting flowers and herbs (such as limnanthes, phacelia, candytuft and coriander)
- Build a support network - use larger vegetables to protect smaller plants and seedlings by acting as a wind block or as a climbing support