

# A Closer Look At Cover Crops

Planting cover crops is a valuable tool for building soil health. As momentum grows around this once niche practice, producers are discovering more ways to make cover crops work.



## What are cover crops?

Planted prior to or immediately after the cash crop harvest, this practice keeps a living cover on the soil for a longer portion of the year. Soils that contain a living root are healthier and less likely to suffer the effects of wind and water erosion. While cover crops are not typically grown to sell, they can be used for grazing.<sup>1</sup>

### Cost-share opportunities

The multitude of benefits provided by cover crops—particularly carbon sequestration—has caught the attention of private companies and public entities who are eager to increase their impact across the Midwest. As a result, numerous cost-share opportunities are available to help producers alleviate the risk that comes with planting cover crops for the first time. In some cases, producers can receive payment for planting cover crops in subsequent years as well. Find more information at [cfra.org/publications/fact-sheet-guide-cover-crop-initiatives-nebraska](https://cfra.org/publications/fact-sheet-guide-cover-crop-initiatives-nebraska).

## Common types of cover crops

As the popularity of cover crops grows, so does the number of species available for planting. Producers interested in planting cover crops for the first time should clarify their conservation and production goals, identify the best time and place to plant a cover crop, and be open to experimentation.<sup>2</sup>

**Grasses:** Grass cover crops include cereal species such as rye, wheat, barley, oats, and triticale, as well as forage grasses, such as annual ryegrass. These species are known for scavenging nutrients—particularly nitrogen left behind by the previous crop. They also control erosion, suppress weeds, and add organic matter to the soil.<sup>3</sup>

**Legumes:** Legume cover crops such as clover, vetch, and peas can fix nitrogen to the soil, making it available for subsequent crops and requiring fewer inputs from producers. Legumes also prevent erosion, support beneficial insects and pollinators, and increase organic matter.<sup>4</sup>

## Sources

1 “Carbon Impact of Conservation Practices: Cover Crops.” Center for Rural Affairs, Oct. 26, 2022, [cfra.org/publications/carbon-impact-conservation-practices-cover-crops](https://cfra.org/publications/carbon-impact-conservation-practices-cover-crops). Accessed January 2024.

2 “Managing Cover Crops Profitably, Third Edition.” Sustainable Agriculture Research & Education, June 2012, [sare.org/wp-content/uploads/Managing-Cover-Crops-Profitably.pdf](https://sare.org/wp-content/uploads/Managing-Cover-Crops-Profitably.pdf). Accessed January 2024.

3 “Cover Crops for Sustainable Crop Rotations.” Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education, [sare.org/wp-content/uploads/Cover-Crops-for-Sustainable-Crop-Rotations.pdf](https://sare.org/wp-content/uploads/Cover-Crops-for-Sustainable-Crop-Rotations.pdf). Accessed January 2024.

4 Ibid.



**Brassicas:** Brassica cover crops include mustard, rapeseed, radish, and turnips. These plants use excess nutrients and break up soil compaction, which allows deeper rooting by the next crop and improves water infiltration and storage. They are also useful when rapid growth is needed to keep fall erosion at bay.<sup>5</sup>

**Multi-species:** Sometimes referred to as mixes or “cocktails,” multi-species cover crops allow producers to achieve multiple objectives at once. Cover crop mixes can be more costly and require careful attention to seeding and management.<sup>6</sup>

## Benefits of cover crops

Every operation is different. While one producer may plant cover crops to improve soil health, another may be invested in the additional grazing options cover crops provide. Regardless of motivation, planting cover crops has the potential to benefit farms in multiple ways.

- Decreases weed pressure
- Helps soil retain water
- Improves carbon sequestration
- Improves nutrient management
- Improves soil structure
- Increases organic matter
- Provides grazing for livestock
- Provides mulch
- Reduces erosion



Watch a video about cover crops at [rb.gy/bxifn6](https://rb.gy/bxifn6).

## How to get started

The U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Natural Resources Conservation Service supports cover crops through programs such as the Conservation Stewardship Program and the Environmental Quality Incentives Program, which provide producers with technical and financial assistance. To find your local office, visit [offices.sc.egov.usda.gov/locator/app](https://offices.sc.egov.usda.gov/locator/app).



### Sources

5 “Magdoff, Fred, and Harold van Es. “Building Soils for Better Crops, Ch. 10. Cover Crops.” Sustainable Agriculture and Research Education, 2021, [sare.org/publications/building-soils-for-better-crops/cover-crops/#Other-Crops](https://sare.org/publications/building-soils-for-better-crops/cover-crops/#Other-Crops). Accessed January 2024.

6 “Cover Crops for Sustainable Crop Rotations.” Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education, [sare.org/wp-content/uploads/Cover-Crops-for-Sustainable-Crop-Rotations.pdf](https://sare.org/wp-content/uploads/Cover-Crops-for-Sustainable-Crop-Rotations.pdf). Accessed January 2024.



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