



## Use Cover Crops to Improve Soil

By Barbara Pleasant

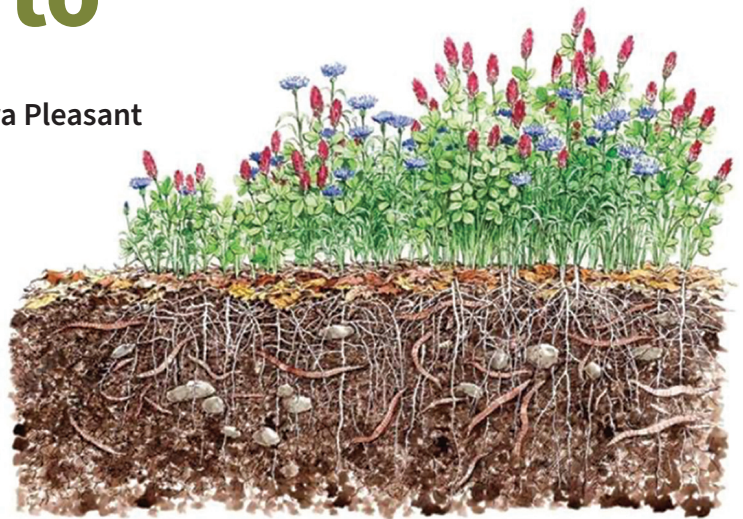
**C**over crops are plants grown for the primary purpose of improving soil; since the early 1900s, farmers have used cover crops to restore fertility to worn-out land. They help bulk up soil with organic matter, prevent erosion, suppress weeds and create and cycle soilborne nutrients using the power of the sun.

Dozens of plants have special talents as cover crops, and if you live in an extremely hot or dry climate, check with your local farm store for plant recommendations.

### Top Cover Crop Options

Several cover crops work well in a wide range of climates and situations, and they're not hard to take down, as long as you do it at the right time and in the proper way. (Note: Many cover-crop plants can become weedy, so they should almost always be taken down before they set seed.) I've selected these six because they are easy to manage using hand tools, grow during different seasons and provide multiple benefits in the garden.

- **Buckwheat** (*Fagopyron esculentum*)
- **Barley** (*Hordeum vulgare*)
- **Oats** (*Avena sativa*) mixed with cold-hardy winter peas (*Pisum sativum*)
- **Hairy vetch** (*Vicia villosa*)
- **Cereal rye** (*Secale cereale*)



Consider plants that quickly produce an abundance of leaves and stems but are easy to pull up or chop down. Bush beans, leafy greens or even sweet corn can be grown as short-term cover crops, along with annual flowers such as calendulas and borage in early spring, or marigolds and sunflowers in summer. Teaming a flower with a cover crop plant is fun, whether you're planting sulphur cosmos with cowpeas in summer, oats with dwarf sunflowers in late summer or bachelor's buttons with crimson clover in the fall. Whatever you do, don't leave your soil bare or you'll miss out on a chance to capture solar energy to recharge your food web.

Barbara Pleasant ([barbarapleasant.com](http://barbarapleasant.com)) gardens in southwest Virginia, where she grows vegetables, herbs, fruit and flowers. Read her full article about cover crops at [bit.ly/3ESQ5ay](https://bit.ly/3ESQ5ay).

## POINSETTIA CARE

**D**uring the holidays, while in full bloom, poinsettias typically enjoy semi-cool, humid locations in bright, indirect light with plenty of moisture. Water them thoroughly, ensure adequate drainage and don't let them sit in water-filled saucers. Adding plants nearby can help increase humidity levels in dry rooms, as will humidifiers.

After the holidays, return the plant to a sunny area and water well. Cut back all branches to about 6 inches from the pot's rim. Consider repotting the poinsettia using the same type of soil. While poinsettias can be kept indoors throughout summer, many people move them outdoors in a sunny but protected area of the flower garden by sinking the pot into the ground.

After new growth has reached between 6 to 10 inches, pinch out the tips once a month until mid-August to encourage branching. Once nights become longer in fall, bring the poinsettia indoors. From September through November, light becomes crucial in poinsettia plant care. To encourage blooming, poinsettias require long periods of darkness at night (about 12 hours). Therefore, move the poinsettia to a location where it will not receive any nighttime light or cover it with a box. Allow plenty of light during the day so the plant can absorb enough energy for flowering. Warmer days (65 - 70 F) and cooler nights (55 - 60 F)

are also recommended. Provide semi-cool, humid locations in bright, indirect light with plenty of moisture once blooming occurs.

Visit [bit.ly/3MDmuDS](https://bit.ly/3MDmuDS) to read more. For more information about other holiday plants, visit [bit.ly/3gaSiE2](https://bit.ly/3gaSiE2).



## Garden Center Updates

- Say hello when you see a garden center volunteer, partner with one and introduce them to other gardeners. If you'd like to volunteer and help keep the garden centers debris free, clean and beautiful. Find the volunteer application at [lagunawoodsvillage.com](https://lagunawoodsvillage.com) > **Amenities > Recreation**; download, print and populate; and bring the completed applications to the Garden Center 2 office.
- Garden tool painting is underway. Garden Center 1 tools are orange; Garden Center 2 tools are yellow.
- The garden/tree plot wait list has been expanded. Please direct those who may want a plot to call the garden center office at **949-268-2387**.
- Call Security Services at **949-580-1400** if you discover a water leak or property damage. If they are unable to address an issue, they will contact the appropriate on-call staff. Regardless, please call garden center staff as soon as possible at **949-268-2387** and leave a message detailing the incident. Your assistance in these circumstances is greatly appreciated.
- Garden center office hours: Reach the garden center specialist Tue. - Sat., 8 a.m. - 4:30 p.m., at **949-268-2387**; reach the garden center lead Mon. - Fri., 7 a.m. - 3:30 p.m., at **949-633-3394**; reach the recreation office Mon. - Fri., 8 a.m. - 5 p.m., at **949-597-4273**.

## Important Reminders

- **Help prevent flooding**; close all hose bib/water sources. Never leave the garden until you have confirmed the water is no longer on.