

## GREEN MANURES

*Mike Wheeler*

**T**here are a number of plants that might be sown as a green manure. Over-wintering green manures mop up nutrients that might be leached out over the winter. They also cover the ground and suppress weeds. Garden Organic lists eleven plants and the RHS, thirteen plants used as green manures. Most are fast growing and many are legumes (pea family) so they fix nitrogen in their root nodules.

It is important to know your soil, as some prefer a heavy soil while others need a lighter type. It is also helpful to understand the different characteristics of the different plants. For example, mustard is a brassica and should not be sown in ground that has had club root present. Grazing rye, which is good for improving soil structure, produces a seed germination suppressant when it rots down. This is good for suppressing weeds but will also suppress other seeds too, so vegetable seeds should not be sown for four weeks after you have dug in the plants.

For heavy soils, as many of us have here in Devon, mustard is probably a good choice. It can be grown in early September and then by the end of October it can be dug in to break down, leaving the soil exposed to be further broken down by the winter weather. Use the mustard seed at 2g per sq. metre. The rationale for this approach is that it avoids trying to dig heavy soil in the spring. For lighter soils, grazing rye might be sown in September. It is a slow-growing winter crop and will be ready to dig in next spring. This is sown at 25g per sq. metre. Phacelia is another common green manure that can be sown anytime from May to late summer. Like the rye, it can be left to grow over the winter and then dug in the following spring.

Green manures are generally dug in before the flowers fully form and, crucially, before they seed. It is suggested that after digging in, the ground is left for a couple of weeks to avoid any seed-suppressing effects. The only disadvantage is that they produce a nice canopy for slugs and snails to hide under!

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