

Green Manures & Cover Crops

Grow a crop specifically to feed the soil, not to harvest

DIFFICULTY Easy

TYPE Seasonal technique

TIME 6–12 weeks per cycle



DIFFICULTY
Easy



TIME
6–12 weeks



COST
Low



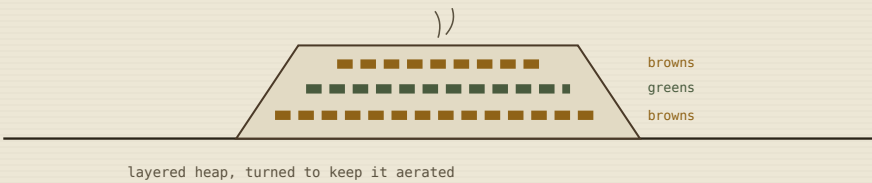
BEST SEASON
Between main
crops, or over
winter



FREQUENCY
1–2 times a year
per bed

01 Grown to be dug back in

A cover crop like clover, mustard, or field peas is sown into an empty bed, then cut and dug in (or left as mulch) before it seeds — adding organic matter and, for legumes, fixed nitrogen back into the soil.



02 What you'll need

- Cover crop seed suited to your climate and goal (e.g. clover, mustard, field peas, oats)
- An empty bed between main crops
- A mower, slasher, or secateurs for cutting back before digging in

03 Method

1. Choose a cover crop suited to the season and your goal — legumes for nitrogen, brassicas like mustard for pest/disease break, grains for biomass.
2. Sow densely across the bare bed.
3. Let it grow until just before flowering, when nutrient content peaks and it hasn't yet set seed.
4. Cut it down and either dig it into the top layer of soil, or leave it as a mulch (no-dig approach).
5. Wait 2–3 weeks after digging in before planting the next crop, to let initial breakdown occur.

04 Troubleshooting

- **Cover crop sets seed and becomes a weed** — cut it back before flowering finishes; don't leave it too long.
- **Poor germination** — often from a dry surface; water in well after sowing.
- **Slow breakdown after digging in** — very woody or mature growth breaks down slowly; cut earlier and smaller next time.
- **Not enough time between main crops** — choose a fast-cycling cover crop, or skip a full cycle and use mulch instead.

05 Timing & maintenance

BEST TIME	Any gap between main crops, or over an entire winter/off-season on a bed that would otherwise sit bare.
DURATION	6–12 weeks depending on the cover crop chosen and the season.
MAINTENANCE	Minimal once established; mainly timing the cut-back correctly.
SIGNS OF SUCCESS	Vigorous, dense green growth about to flower, ready to be cut and incorporated.

06 Tips & variations

PAIRS WELL WITH

Building Healthy Soil

No-Dig Gardening

COMMON MISTAKES

Letting the cover crop set seed before cutting it back

Leaving a bed bare instead of cover-cropping it over an off-season

PRO TIP

Field peas or another legume cover crop is one of the most effective ways to build nitrogen ahead of a hungry crop like corn or brassicas.