The Benefits of Cover Crops in the Garden

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Although the growing season is ending, more work remains to set the garden up for next year's success. Cover crops can improve soil health and structure by acting as a living mulch during winter. Three main crop categories exist: grass, legumes, and broadleaf non-legumes.

Certain plants can provide different benefits to help correct soil issues. Legumes produce nitrogen, increasing the amount available, while non-legumes trap nitrogen that may move out of the growing zone. Once chopped and allowed to decompose, the nitrogen again becomes available over time.

Cover crops can also suppress weeds and manage pests by providing a habitat for beneficial insects. You can grow a variety of crops in the fall, including some winter-kill varieties that keep labor to a minimum. Cold-hardy crops will need to be chopped and smothered in the spring before they can go to seed.

Historically, fall cover crops are planted mid-August through mid-October, but as our growing season lengthens, this timeline shifts. Before choosing a variety, consider what issues you need to address in the garden. While planting requires a bit more labor and time, your garden will thank you!!

References:
https://yardandgarden.extension.iastate.edu/how-to/cover-crops-home-vegetable-gardens
https://vtechworks.lib.vt.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/2b775444-3f89-4bcc-a3db-b2c421e11713/content
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