Benefits of Cover Crops Demonstrated

The Situation
Weeds are a problem in home gardens and water contamination by herbicides from home landscapes has been documented. Many homeowners with weed problems would prefer not to use pesticides. Cover crops to control weeds have been successfully used in cropping situations. Cover crops will control weeds, and can also suppress diseases, control erosion, and serve as home to beneficial insects. Leguminous cover crops fix nitrogen returning it to the soil when the plants decompose. All cover crops release nutrients and provide organic matter to the soil when they decompose. In fact, some cover crops will tie up soil nutrients that otherwise might leach away with irrigation or rain water. Those with deep roots mine the soil, absorbing nutrients unavailable to shallow rooted plants. Cover crops have found limited use in home gardens. Their practicality is untested and not very many home gardeners even know about cover crops and their benefits.

Our Response
In spring of 1997, a cover crop demonstration site was established on the grounds of the Sawtooth Community Garden Project south of Ketchum, Idaho. A presentation was given during the summer workshop series that outlined the use and management of cover crops around the home. Our goal was to heighten awareness of cover crops as a weed control and soil management strategy among the homeowners in the Wood River Valley.

Achievements
Seven types of cover crops were planted at the Sawtooth Community Garden Project Grounds. Species included hairy vetch, Austrian winter peas, berseem clover, nitro alfalfa, yellow mustard, buckwheat and annual rye. All were expected not to be winter hardy. Signs explained cover crop benefits and characteristics of individual species.

The Community Garden is open at all times to the public and special activities are held periodically on the grounds. An estimated 150 people viewed the demonstration site. Eight people attended the workshop on cover crops and all indicated that they would try it in their own gardens.

The Community Garden staff cared for the cover crops. They learned a lot about characteristics and management of each species.

The Future
The Community Garden staff and the Extension staff will make experience-based recommendations on the choice, effectiveness and management of cover crops. Awareness about cover crops has been heightened in the gardening community.

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