



Approach 2: In addition to the above approach, we also established our own hayfield of legumes to use as dry baled mulch. If you can't grow your own hayfield of legumes, seek out the names of dairy farmers (legume hay is generally fed to dairy cows) through your local feed supply store to see if they might have extra bales of legume hay for sale. It will be more expensive than regular hay but would be a good option for very small gardens. We grew our own and use every bale in our garden. Our experiment using it in 3 different amounts under acorn squash showed that the best yield and highest chlorophyll readings (measuring adequate N) were on Treatments 2 and 3 on which we used 6 bales and 9 bales respectively of hay mulch around the squash hills. I believe the plants received benefit not only from the slow nitrogen release but from the mulch itself in a drought-prone year. Another tremendous benefit to this hay will be its organic matter addition to the soil.

Logistics/cautions: I don't recommend using alfalfa. A key bit of information I didn't have when I started this experiment two years ago is that alfalfa mosaic virus can be transferred to another crop by chopping and spreading infected material on that crop. We did have 2 basil plants in the alfalfa section with bright yellow blotches which could possibly be from the virus. (The virus can't be spread by using dry alfalfa hay.) To grow clover, make a fine seedbed as you would for direct-seeded lettuce. Test soil previous fall. Test results will tell you if you need any soil amendments. If so, apply and work lightly into top 2" of soil (with hand rake or rototiller). Broadcast seed by hand or, in larger areas, with a handcrank broadcast spreader (or seed with a grain drill pulled behind a tractor). Roll seed to be sure it is in contact w/soil. If seeding early (March/April), also seed a nurse crop such as oats that will help protect the emerging seedlings until they get bigger. Leave 1 foot wide bare soil alley for basil down the center of the seeded legume strip. Will only need 1 lb. legume seed (remember to inoculate legume seeds before planting) for a 6' x 40' plot. Set basil plants out in late May or early June. Mow legumes when 8-10" tall. They will need cutting maybe 3 times in the growing season. Depending on your winters (we are in Zone 5), don't mow much past early Sept. so legumes will have time to recover and be strong to make it through the winter. The legume seeding will last several years. When you rotate your basil planting out of this area, you'll probably want to turn under the legumes in the autumn of that year. Plant a very nitrogen-needy crop subsequently—such as corn—as there will be nitrogen nodulation on the roots of the former legume now available to the following crop.

Further notes: Clover also appears to be more pest resistant than alfalfa. In our experiment, we planted sections of each to see if there were significant N release differences. Overall, the clover performed better than the alfalfa. And for reasons stated above, I don't recommend growing alfalfa within the vegetable garden during the growing season.