

Prioritize your long-term soil health with cover crops

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Soil: A farm's no. 1 investment

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FOUNTAIN, Minn. — Research is continually pointing to the benefits of keeping soil covered throughout the year. It helps build the soil, retain water and serve as habitat for pollinators, said Caroline van Schalk of the Land Stewardship Project.

"With the kind of weather we're having, it's critical to keep your soil covered," she said. "You always want something growing both above and below the ground."

"The best method to build soil health is with cover crops. Not only does it benefit farm operations, it protects against erosion that harms water quality."

According to an LSP fact sheet, "Studies show perennials are typically calved early in the season, which can reduce runoff and erosion by as much as 90 percent. Cover crops can reduce nitrogen runoff by 20 percent to 30 percent, according to some estimates."

With a new test LSP is running, it's getting quicker to see results.

"The test was developed by Rick Haney and is named for him. It involves taking soil samples and testing them for nitrogen and microbial activity. Two farmers who have taken part in the Haney Soil Test Project opened their fields for the afternoon of Sept. 29 and demonstrated how they've used cover crops to strengthen their soil investment and produce better cash crops."

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Brita Moore/AgriNews

Marty Malin and Jim Paulson of the Minnesota Extension Service, look over the growth of Malin's cover crops so far.

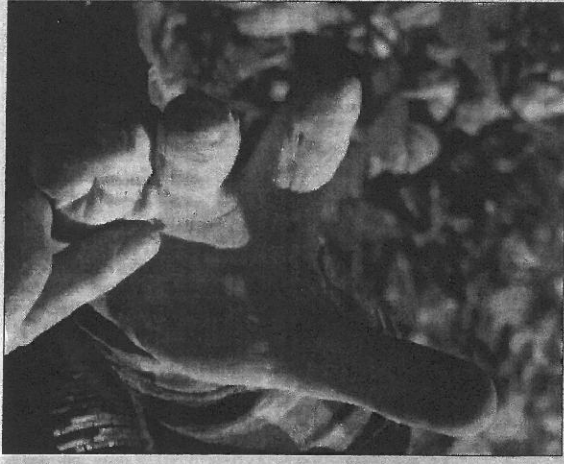
Their 50-acre plot on their main property currently has soybeans on it, with a cover crop ring around it of oats, radish and hairy vetch.

"The field peas were planted toward the end of April," Jeff Gillespie said. "We want to plant corn on here next year. We were going to till it up and plant it, so I thought if we had a chance to get a second crop, let's try that."

His soybeans have turned out quite well. He planted them July 6 and plans to no-till in a cover crop when the beans come off. Most likely winter rye, so he's hoping for a late frost this year.

For the Gillespies, cover crops have "green manure" for the cover crops serve as effective "green manure" for the cover crops.

Jeff Gillespie said, "But it did come." "There are two things I don't like: erosion and gophers."



Brita Moore/AgriNews

Jeff Gillespie holds a radish seed that was interseeded with his soybeans.

The Malins are just south of Peterson. Their example field is on a hill, with a couple rows of corn stretching along a line and cover crops recently planted on that same line.

Marty Malin planted triticale, radishes and peas on Sept. 21, but it's coming," he said. "I doesn't look real good, but it didn't put the seed in the ground much, but they radishes pull up deep minerals."

The field that the Gillespies had sampled for the Haney test is a few miles away from their home property. They used the same mix on it last fall.

"We grazed it for a week or so, and in the spring, the vetch was really slow in coming," Jeff Gillespie said. "But it did come."

For more about the Haney project, you can write to van Schalk at caroline@landstewardshipproject.org.

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