

Cover crops benefit soil health on any scale

Spiral Design Studio (www.spiraldesign.com)



I have been gardening for almost as long as I can remember, starting by helping my Dad and grandmother with their gardens, spending many years farming and gardening around the U.S., and now tending a too-large garden at home near Shushan. Over the years my techniques have changed, and I now work the garden beds with hand tools and try to keep the soil covered with living plants as much as possible. Planting cover crops, also know as green manure crops is a great way to keep the soil covered while improving soil health and fertility.

This year I have a beautiful stand of yellow blossom sweet clover, pictured below. Its Latin name is *Melilotus officinalis*. It is in the Legume family, cousin to red and white clover, garden peas and beans and many more plants which form a symbiotic relationship with bacteria to fix nitrogen, making it available for plant growth.

This beauty also has a strong tap root that penetrates compacted soil increasing aeration and water-holding capacity and taking up minerals from the sub-soil. It is also winter-hardy and drought-tolerant, which is looking like a good thing this June! Plus, the honeybees love it. Experiment with a new cover crop in your garden or farm fields and reap the benefits.

ASA received a NESARE grant in 2019 to work with 3 local farmers to demonstrate intersowing cover crops in silage corn. Over the three-year life of the grant we hope to show the benefits to soil health including reduced compaction and improved water holding capacity. Look for information on the results of our first year's work this fall.



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