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The Importance of Cover Crops



The frosty nights have taken their toll on the heat-loving plants and things are winding down quickly at the Global Greens farm. Tomatoes, beans and peppers have been dead for a couple weeks now. This is the cycle we live with at the farm, and now is the time to prepare for winter. Iowa’s winter rains and temperature swings can be hard on soils. Soils left bare to these forces are damaged, so we encourage farmers at Global Greens to plant fall cover crops and leave mulch on the ground until spring.

If you are not familiar with cover crops, they are crops planted in fields that are not grown to be sold. There are several types of crops used by vegetable farmers for this role:

- Radish-based cover crops that can help break up hard-packed soil.
- Legumes, like peas or vetch, will add nitrogen to the soil.
- Perennial grasses and grains often are chosen for their biomass and ability to out compete-weeds.

For many Global Greens farmers, we will use a cover crop that will grow again in early spring to hold soil in place and protect through the heavy spring rains.

This year, we received a grant from SARE, which enabled us to give free cover crop seed to farmers, removing worries about the economics of cover cropping. We can also pay farmers to teach other beginning farmers what they learn about cover cropping. It can be difficult to fit cover crops into the busy rotation of a vegetable farmer, so we teach the various ways they can be used, then let farmers experiment to find the ways how they work best in that system.

Cover crops keep our soil healthy, which keeps the plants healthy, which means healthy produce for you! Healthy soils also can mean less work for the farmers with fewer bug and disease problems to solve.

