



It's not too late to plant a fall cover crop.

Cover crops serve an important function in our agricultural ecosystems and are much under utilized. Cover crops range from a single species planted for a single purpose or a mixture of up to 5 or more species serving multiple soil improvement functions.

One primary purpose of cover crops is to protect the soil from erosion. After the primary crop has been harvested and next seasons crop is established the soil is often left barren of growing vegetation, exposing it to the effects of wind and water. Growing plants reduce wind speed at the surface, thus reducing wind erosion. Growing plant roots produce glue like substances that hold soil particles together thereby reducing water erosion. For erosion benefits look for species that cover the surface quickly such as small grain, buckwheat or rye.

Some cover crop species perform other functions such as scavenging excess fertilizer. Producers who applied their spring fertilizer prior to the rains and were then unable to plant the intended crop should consider planting a cover crop that will utilize the nitrogen to prevent leaching and runoff into ground and surface waters. When the cover crop is terminated the nitrogen that was taken up by the plant will remain in near the surface of the soil ready for next seasons crop. Consider planting winter barley, cereal rye, sorghum-sudangrass or winter wheat.

Legumes as a cover crop produce nitrogen, reducing commercial fertilizer cost. Deep rooted crops such as annual ryegrass, and tillage radish work to reduce soil compaction.

Things to consider when choosing a cover crop include how do you intend to terminate the crop, will it freeze out or do you need to spray it, till it or graze it.

Contact your local NRCS office for more information on cover crops.

USDA is an Equal Opportunity Provider and Employer