



Fall Ahead - Build Spring Garden Beds Now

By Amy Stewart

For most gardeners, spring is the time for digging new planting beds. Until I learned better, I followed the same calendar. The first warm day of the season would find me outside with a shovel, trying to turn over the stretch of lawn that I wanted to convert to a veggie patch or flowerbed. It was hard work, and the new beds often lacked the fertility of my established gardens.

The secret is to build new beds in fall and seed them with soil enriching cover crops. By spring, beautiful, fertile beds are ready for planting. The only digging required is turning under the cover crop before planting, which I have found is a lot less work than busting up sod. This method combines the best of two time-tested garden-building techniques—layering and cover cropping—and the result is fluffy beds that are supercharged with fertility.

This method leaves the soil structure undisturbed, just as nature intended. Earthworms and other beneficial organisms flourish, and weeds are choked out.

Lay It On Thick

Once you have decided where you want your new bed to be, the process is simple and requires surprisingly little work.

1. Start with a layer of cardboard or black-and-white newspaper. Lay it directly on top of grass or weeds and thoroughly wet it. A good thick layer (10 to 15 sheets of newspaper) will smother weeds and sod, and all that decaying matter will form the foundation of your spring bed.
2. Add a layer a couple of inches deep of moist garden soil to weigh down the paper layer and speed up the decomposition of the sod below.
3. Next, spread any fallen leaves, grass clippings, or well chopped kitchen waste you have handy onto the bed. Be creative - a local brewery may have spent hops to spare, or a juice shop may have carrot pulp. Many coffee shops will gladly give you all the grounds you want.
4. Add a thin layer of soil or finished compost--just enough to sow the cover-crop seed into. When I empty flowerpots in fall, I also add the leftover potting soil.
5. Plant a cold-tolerant cover crop directly on top. In frost-prone areas, plant in late summer or early fall. Some crops can tolerate temperatures well below freezing if you give them 6 to 8 weeks to become established.

Cover crops offer many benefits. They hold soil in place over winter and prevent erosion. Their roots reach deep to break up compacted solids. Leguminous varieties add nitrogen to the soil as they grow. And when the crop is turned under in spring, it provides a quick, plentiful dose of organic matter. Let the soil rest 2 weeks before planting. You can order cover crops through seed catalogs, but I enjoy the full ritual of browsing the bins of the local seed store for bulk seed.

In a cool, coastal climate such as mine (where freezing temperatures are rare), cover crops will grow steadily through winter. Even if they happen to be killed off by a freeze, you can easily turn the crop residue under in the spring or plant seedlings directly into the mulch of the dead cover crop, which will provide weed control. Some cover crops, such as crimson clover, may green up again in spring even after a hard freeze.

Relax and Wait for Spring

During the short, chilly days of December and January, your garden will be at work even while you are inside with seed catalogs. The layers of organic matter will decompose, leaving crumbly soil behind. Because each bed is gently raised above the ground the soil will warm as the days gradually grow longer.

In spring, turn the cover crops under before they set seed. If you've got a large area, consider mowing the crops down before turning them under. Let them decompose for about 2 weeks. You will be surprised by just how rich and loamy your beds are.

Recommended Cover Crops

Annual ryegrass (*Lolium multiflorum*): Ryegrass germinates quickly in cool weather and loosens soil with its tremendous root system. It's often mixed with vetch or clover, which both bring nitrogen to the soil. Because annual ryegrass grows vigorously and goes to seed quickly in the spring, it can become a nuisance. Turn it under early in the season. Annual ryegrass has mild cold tolerance, though winter rye is a hardier alternative that, once well established, will handle temperatures as low as -30 degrees Fahrenheit.

Crimson clover (*Trifolium incarnatum*): A showy annual legume, clover fixes nitrogen in the soil and sports gorgeous red flowers in spring. It's often used in orchards and vineyards as a permanent cover crop to add nitrogen, attract beneficial insects, and increase earthworm populations. I let a few plants mature in my vegetable beds each year; the brilliant red flowers attract bees and add color. More cold tolerant than other clovers, crimson clover withstands temperatures as low as 10 degrees Fahrenheit. It should be well established 6 weeks before the average first frost date.

Fava Bean (*Vicia faba*): Plant seeds of the cool season legume 2 inches deep in fall and look for tall, fat stalks in winter. The fibrous stalks add bulk to the compost pile if you don't leave them all in place to decompose. Plants survive temperatures to 10 degrees Fahrenheit.

Hairy Vetch (*Vicia villosa*): Vetch, a legume, is prized for its ability to choke out weeds and provide nitrogen and large quantities of organic matter. It is often grown in combination with a grain such as rye, which supports vetch's vining habit. I love the purple flowers and always let a few climb up my sunflower stalks in summer. (It can be difficult to manage if it puts on a lot of growth, so you may want to cut it back early in the season.) Hairy vetch is cold tolerant to 0 degrees Fahrenheit.

Mustard (*Brassica*): this annual plant produces a massive root system and is often used to break up heavy, compacted soils. Plants tolerate a light or occasional freeze.