



## Cover Crops

### Overview

Fields in a corn-soybean rotation can benefit from planting cover crops immediately after harvest and allowing them to stand through the winter. Cover crops help improve soil health, protect the soil surface, suppress winter weeds and hold nitrogen and other nutrients in the soil.

### What you should know

- Prioritize the situations that cover crops could help address:
  - Cover crops reduce winter weed pressure.
  - Winter crops save fertilizer expenses by recovering soil nutrients for use by crops the following season, especially in years following drought, when nutrients are left unused.
  - Cover crops with aggressive root systems help break up compacted soils and improve drainage.
  - Growing cover crops can help farmers move from conventional tillage to a no-till system.
- All cover crops help reduce soil erosion. Specific crops offer other benefits:
  - Legumes such as vetch, clover, cowpeas and winter peas capture nitrogen in the upper soil profile.
  - Winter-hardy small grains such as winter wheat, cereal rye and annual ryegrass reduce weed competition, shading out winter annuals like henbit, chickweed and marestail.
  - *Brassica* species with large taproots reach deep into soil to break up soil compaction and improve moisture infiltration.



*Soybeans planted into a ryegrass cover crop benefit from improved soil health and weed suppression.*



### 30-Second Summary

- Cover crops planted after harvest can improve and maintain soil quality in intensive corn-soybean rotations.
- Choose specific cover crops to help you meet your soil and planting goals.
- Seed early—over an existing crop or right after harvest.

### Action steps

1. **Seed early:** Establish cover crops as early as possible. Plant right after current crop harvest by drilling or using precision planting technique, or spread seed over the existing crop with aerial application or high-clearance spreaders.
2. **Manage spring planting:** If the cover crop has not winter-killed, apply a contact herbicide just prior to planting the new corn or soybean crop. For best results, plant the new crop directly into winter crop residue without tilling.

For more information, contact:



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