

Oct. 2, 2012

Cover Crops

Long before commercial fertilizers were created, farmer used cover crops to increase soil health and productivity and there is increased interest in the use of cover crops by today's producer. Cover crops prevent surface soil crusting and help maintain and improve soil porosity. They are used to prevent erosion, add organic matter, and suppress weeds and feed microbes and microfauna, such as earthworms. The decision to use cover crops must be because you want to enhance yields or reduce input costs, according to Dave Brandt an Ohio farmer who has used the system for 34 years on his farm.

This year has its good and bad news aspects. First the bad news, there is applied fertility that is in the soil in an unstable form. The good news is that cover crops can pull up those nutrients that could otherwise be lost. Another bad news is that dry weather can cause herbicide carryover, which could prevent cover crop germination and lead farmers to run afoul of label restrictions, should the cover crop be harvested for forage or grazed.

Following is a list of things to consider when deciding whether or not to use cover crops this fall:

- 1. Know what you want to accomplish.** Options to consider are scavenging leftover nutrients, compaction or drainage problems, building organic matter, improving water retention, use for grazing, erosion control, or adding fixed nitrogen from legumes. Learn the strengths and weaknesses of each cover crop and chose the one that best fits your goals.
- 2. Single crop or mixes.** Decide what cover crops will work and then consider blends of cover crops. Indications are that a blend will improve soil health faster than a single species. Your natural Resources Conservation office has a list of species most adapted to our region.
- 3. Figure your input costs.** If you are planting cover crops for the first time, you should have some kind of balanced fertilizer such as 12-12-12.
- 4. When to plant.** Crop seeding is based on choice of cover crops, rainfall, harvest timing, and the first frost date. The sooner a cover crop is in , the sooner it can begin picking up the nutrients.
- 5. Planting Options.** Just about any type of planting is used, but with larger seeded species, it's better to use a drill or planter at a depth of ½ to 1 inch. Your drill or planter can be used and if you need to get over ground quicker or wet conditions exist, aerial application is another option.

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