



Illinois Sustainable Ag Partnership – Cover Crop Guide #1

Planning - The Key to Cover Crop Success

1. Start planning early! The sooner the better. Ideally, you should have a plan for cover crop seed and management strategies before spring planting begins. July 1st at the latest.
2. In early spring, contact your county NRCS district conservationist to see if you can sign up for a program that includes payments for planting cover crops the next fall.
3. Choose the best field to start growing cover crops. Think smaller acres when you start planting cover crops for the first time. Focus on your best drained fields first to minimize management complications and maximize water quality benefits.
4. Select your cover crops for fall in early spring. Choose a species of cover crop to fit your rotation, field issues and field conditions. Identify one that will help correct any problems: wet soils, compaction, nutrient loss, etc. Plan to leave a check strip without cover crops for an area of comparison.
5. For cover crop selection and management advice contacting Illinois Cover Crop Specialist, local Extension agronomist, NRCS DC, crop consultant or go to www.mccc.msu.edu and select the “cover crop decision tool”. It will have most of the information you need, seeding dates by county, seeding rates and cover crop characteristics. Consider an easy, terminal mix such as oats and radish if trying cover crops for the first time.
6. Purchase high quality seed and named varieties from a reputable cover crop seed source at the end of the spring planting of your cash crops (June and no later than July -some varieties may require ordering before April). There is a large difference in different cover crop varieties, so buy varieties not VNS seed whenever possible.
7. Contact your herbicide retailer to help you choose herbicides compatible with the species you have chosen in the early spring prior to fall seeding of the cover crop. Some herbicides can last until fall cover crop planting and the result is poor or no stands of cover crops after seeding. Look at labels, notice planting date restrictions to next crop. Watch for high pH soils as some herbicides will be much more active and cause cover crop damage in the fall. Discuss termination options for the next crop year.

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8. **Decide how you are going to seed the cover crop. Consider aerial or in crop seeding starting in mid to late August. After corn black layers and has sunlight on the ground or soybeans are starting to turn yellow is the time to seed. Contact your aerial applicator early in the summer if aerial seeding is your choice or make sure you have your drill field ready. Plant or aerially seed in a timely manner for maximum fall growth and consider adding some N following corn for quicker establishment and growth.**
9. **Remember radish, rapeseed, clovers, annual ryegrass will all need to be seeded by September 15 for best results. Oats can be seeded until October 1. Cereal rye, triticale or wheat can be planted much later in October. If this is your first time to over wintering cover crops, consider seeding at a lower rate to make it easier to kill and plant into next spring.**
10. **Poorly managed cover crops virtually always will result in poor results. Make sure you are willing to devote the time to learn, go to meetings and try small fields before jumping in with lots of acres.**

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