

Q: What kind of plants can be used as living mulch? I would like to help the soil in the area where I grow my tomatoes.

A: Not so very long ago most gardeners and small farmers understood that land need to 'rest,' that is, to have periods of time where no crops or flowers were grown. This is difficult to achieve in our home gardens, but there are several adaptations that homeowners can make that allow the same kind of rejuvenation to take place. Integral in this process is the concept of cover crops or living mulches.

Living mulch refers to the use of plants which when planted in the correct density can help mitigate depleted soils. Cover crops plants are usually planted in the early fall, in prepared seed beds. The plants that are most commonly planted are vetches and clovers, plants that are capable of taking atmospheric nitrogen and 'fixing' it into the soil, attracting beneficial insects suppressing weeds and adding organic material to the soil. The combination of crimson clover and hairy vetch can be used very successfully.

The seeds should be scattered about two months prior to cold weather; which in most of the Bay Area means late September or early October. Hairy Vetch seeds sprouts in about one week, forming a mat 6-8" high before cold weather starts. The foliage may turn purple if freezes occur, but growth will start again once the weather warms up. It will form a dense mat about 2' in height by the time you are ready to plant your tomatoes. The clover may take a little longer to germinate. When you want to plant, cut the plants off several inches above the ground, and spread them on the soil surface. If you need to increase the soil nitrogen, chop the plants with a shovel and incorporate them into the bed, but this means you won't get some of the benefits of surface mulch. You want to cut back the vetch before it begins to flower. Chop holes in the mulch and plant your tomatoes or other summer vegetable plants directly into the soil. Avoid walking on the soil as much as possible to avoid soil compaction. This technique works best with summer crops, as the mat is too dense for spring crops to grow well, and by fall the material will have decomposed so much that it is not effective.

The University of California has a web-site that lists the details about various- cover-crops:
<http://www.sarep.ucdavis.edu/ccrop/>