

## COVER CROPPING IN THE BACKYARD

*By Chris Wells*

Cover cropping isn't something that most backyard gardeners think about too often. Since it is generally easy to produce enough compost to feed your garden each year, the need for cover crops in small spaces often goes unseen. But, while both compost and cover crops play an important role in soil building, the planting of cover crops can also perform other key functions such as preventing nutrient leaching, protecting soil structure, fixing nitrogen and suppressing weeds. Selecting the right cover crop can also help add beauty and diversity to your garden.



***Above, densely planted sunflowers, a unique allelopathic cover crop***

An often overlooked quality of cover crops is their role in soil preservation, especially during the Winter. Due to frequent winter rains in the Pacific Northwest, our soils are often subject to heavy leaching of nutrients, especially nitrogen and calcium. Both nitrogen and calcium are quite mobile in the soil, and their presence is of paramount importance to plant growth. Nitrogen plays major roles in leaf and stem growth, chlorophyll formation and protein development in plants. Calcium is not only an important nutrient for building cell walls, it also keeps the soil pH more alkaline. Rain washes calcium from the soil, causing acidic conditions which hamper the growth of most vegetables. Cover cropping is an important technique for preventing nutrient leaching as their roots work to better hold nutrients in the soil. While mulching can help prevent leaching as well, it is only resting on the soil surface and does not create the web under the soil for nutrients to bond to.

Winter rains also have another impact on our garden soils, literally! When soil is left bare throughout the winter, the impact of the rain upon its surface will greatly affect the soil structure. Soil structure is the term used to describe how soil particles are stuck together. An ideal soil structure, a loam, is not compacted, has good pore space and good aggregate formations. These soil conditions allow plant roots to easily work their way through the soil to uptake nutrients and water and also provide a healthy environment for micro-organisms. The impact of rain on the soil disturbs this structure, breaking up aggregates into individual particles, thus eliminating pore space. Such a soil is more subject to compaction and erosion, and can easily be damaged through tilling and digging.

Using a nitrogen-fixing cover crop addresses both of the aforementioned problems while actually adding nitrogen to the soil. Austrian winter peas are a great nitrogen fixing crop for this climate, growing slowly all winter, while also being a great summer cover crop. Nitrogen fixing crops form symbiotic relationships with soil microbes which allow for nitrogen formation in soil. The microbes attach themselves to plant roots and extract nitrogen from the air (air in the soil that is, making good soil structure important to the nitrogen-fixing process) to share with the plant, while the plant, in return, provides carbohydrates (energy) to the microbes.

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**WELCOME TO THE  
NEW EXECUTIVE  
DIRECTOR**

Sonya Sundberg is the new Executive Director for the Centre. She began her role in August, and is knee-deep in funding applications, planning sessions and compost already. Originally from a farming background in the Fraser Valley, Sonya spent several years working in the environmental non-profit sector in BC and later in New Brunswick. Sonya now returns to BC after five years of managing Canadian International Development Agency funded projects internationally in organic agriculture, agroforestry, appropriate technology and community economic development. Sonya holds a BA in Anthropology and Latin American Studies, is trained as an Organic Inspector and is currently completing a Graduate Certificate in Food Security. Sonya is also the co-founder of the Planting Hope Education Fund for impoverished Nicaraguan school children and works as a consultant with the Nobel Prize winning International Campaign to Ban Landmines. As an enthusiastic composter, she is delighted to be working with the Centre’s dedicated Staff and Board on “spreading the dirt” about composting in the CRD.

Welcome to the Centre, Sonya!



**A Fond Farewell to  
LYNN ELLIOTT**

On August 12th staff, volunteers and well-wishers said farewell to the Centre’s Executive Director, Lynn Elliott at a surprise noon-hour get-together. She is off on a year’s maternity leave, and so will have her hands full (of diapers and other baby paraphernalia) instead of her usual reports and proposals. We will certainly miss her sunny personality and lively sense of humour, not to mention her occasional impromptu dance-step in the inner office. She began working at the Centre in February of 2001 and by the next February had risen to Executive Director. Thanks for all your dedication and hard work, Lynn. We wish you the very best in your role as new mom, and please visit us often with the little one.

We gratefully acknowledge the core funding support that we receive from the CRD and the City of Victoria. Additional support is provided by the Fernwood Community Association and through the generosity of our Compost Club Members and the residents of Greater Victoria.

## Self-tour at the Compost Centre

This Spring, we undertook the considerable project of creating signs for our garden beds and on-site demonstrations here at the Compost Centre so that visitors can enjoy a self-guided tour. The signs offer a brief description of what you are seeing in each part of the demonstration site. Among the site signs are descriptions of our native plant garden, forest garden/permaculture bed, xeriscape gardening, strawbale building, bathtub ponds and more. Special thanks to Chris Neilson at Iron Works for fabricating our sign holders, and to Al Crow at Speedpro for his help with formatting and creating the signs. We welcome you to drop by and treat yourself to an informative stroll through the site!



## CLEAN-UP CLUB

As a not-for-profit organization, the Compost Centre has always relied on the support of its members. Shopping at The Soap Exchange is a way for members to extend their support, while at the same time buying their personal and household cleaning products at an environmentally-friendly, locally-based business. The Soap Exchange's "Clean-up Club" is a program which helps raise funds for the Compost Centre. Simply by showing your Compost Club Card at the Soap Exchange's central location, 1393A Hillside Avenue, 10% of the money you spend will be donated back to the Compost Centre. To find out more about the Soap Exchange, please call 475-0033 or visit their website at [www.victoriasoapexchange.com](http://www.victoriasoapexchange.com).



Many thanks to Wes Koch, owner of The Soap Exchange, for supporting our programs!

## Get on Board!

Interested in becoming a volunteer Board Member at the Compost Education Centre? If you would like to share your enthusiasm for composting and have skills in areas of communications, finance, fundraising, marketing or other marvelous talents – please let us know, we are looking to fill a vacant position immediately.

We would like to thank Alex Ball for her valuable contributions this past year. Alex has been accepted into the Nursing Program at UBC and has had to leave the Board. While we are sad to lose her, we wish her well in her studies. Congratulations Alex!

## Give the Joy of Composting

Are you looking for a practical gift that keeps on giving for that special someone? Be it a birthday, Christmas or just to say you care – contact us for a Gift Membership to the Compost Club. With it, they can enjoy year round benefits of 10 free Compost Club workshops (topics ranging from Native Plant Gardening to Seed Saving), 10% discount on purchases made at the Centre and affiliated Garden Centres (such as the Big Barn Garden Centre, Garden Works, Dig This and many more), and receive our quarterly newsletter. Contact us for a gift membership package, complete with gift card, newsletter, schedule of events and membership card. Your gift can make a difference in someone's own backyard and the Centre's programs.

## Call for Worms

The Compost Centre wants your worms! If you have some extra red wigglers in your worm bin or backyard bin, we could use them here at the Centre. Due to growing popularity, our waitlist for worm bins now extends into March of 2006! We are doing our best to help other Victoria residents compost in their homes, and now you can help too. Donations also qualify you for a \$40 tax receipt for each pound of worms you bring in. Any questions, just give us a call: 386-WORM. Happy Picking!

## THANK YOU FOR YOUR DONATIONS

We wish to extend our sincere thanks to the following individuals for their generosity in donating to the Centre.

M. Stockdale  
C.A. Browning  
B. Rush  
M. Ladouceur  
The Wieczorek Family  
C. Herriot  
Paradise Cityscapes

## UPCOMING EVENTS

Now that temperatures are cooling, the time is perfect to take advantage of the best organic gardening presentations in the region.

Date (Saturdays)	Topic	Time	Cost
Sept. 24	Gardening Without Pesticides: Know your Soil	2-4pm	\$10/\$9 members
Oct. 1	Composting Basics	11am-1pm	Free
Oct. 15	Native Plant Gardening	2-4pm	\$10/free for members
Oct. 8-9	Weekend Permaculture Workshop	10am-5pm	\$100/\$90 for members
Nov. 5	Composting Basics	11am-1pm	Free
Nov. 12	Urban Chickens: Eggs in the City	2-4pm	\$10/free for members

*MUST PRE-REGISTER FOR WORKSHOPS BY CALLING 386-WORM*

*OR EMAILING [info@compost.bc.ca](mailto:info@compost.bc.ca)*

## COVER CROPPING IN THE BACKYARD *(continued from page 1)*

Cover crops can also be a great form of weed control in winter and summer. Many cover crops, like buckwheat and field peas, are very fast growing, making it difficult for weeds to compete. Buckwheat also has a broad leaf which shades the soil, preventing weeds from reaching the light (and many weed seeds need light to germinate). Other cover crops, such as fall rye and sunflowers, have an allelopathic effect in the soil, which prevents other plants from growing. These plants emit chemicals either from their roots while growing or from their debris when they are turned into the soil. Such cover crops can be useful to control fast growing weeds like dandelions and thistles.

Due to our mild climate, there are many cover crops to choose from. If you want to be creative, try a few unique ideas like calendula, which can sometimes flower in the middle of January and adds lots of organic matter to the soil; and arugula, which grows very fast, will keep very well in the winter and is super tasty as well. Whatever your growing conditions, be it a large or small garden space, cover crops are an important tool for soil preservation and can add a distinctive beauty to your own backyard.

Crop	When To Sow	Comments
Calendula	Summer to Fall	Great for adding lots of organic matter and colour to your garden
Austrian Field Peas	Spring to Fall	Fast growing legume that fixes nitrogen
Winter Peas	Early Spring to late Fall	Fast growing legume that fixes nitrogen
Buckwheat	Spring to late Summer	Fast growing; broad leaves; accumulates phosphorous; attracts insects
Winter Wheat	Late Summer to Fall	Grows dense; over-winters well; cut 2-3 times when knee height
Fall Rye	Late Summer	Over-winters well; allelopathic; dense growing
Sunflowers	Early to mid-Summer	Grows fast and dense; allelopathic; attracts insects

## FLOWER & GARDEN SHOW REPORT

A team effort made the Flower and Garden Show outreach a big success. The Centre partnered with City Green to mount a five-day display (July 28-Aug. 1st) at the Victoria International Flower and Garden Festival's Topaz Park venue. This popular event attracted over 800 visitors to view the "Gardens in Motion", gardening without pesticides and compost education materials. The "garden", an actual raised flower and veggie bed mounted on a mobile flatbed trailer, made a perfect practical demonstration of how compost can mulch, feed and improve soil structure in the home garden. In addition, new fact sheets, developed between the Centre and City Green, provided specific tips on alternative methods for handling individual garden pests, one sheet per pest. The fact sheets continue to be available at the Centre for all those who missed the Festival. We would like to thank the CRD for providing the special funding to make this event possible.

Special thanks to the following volunteers who helped educate the public with their finely-tuned outreach skills at the display: Janet Hockin, Karmin Snow, Maria Jose Pria, Kathy Cook and Jen Zacher. Volunteer support of this kind makes it possible to attend over fifty events per year in the CRD.

P.s.: Congratulations to Mark Gagne from Esquimalt, who won the raffle for the Earth Machine at the Show. Happy composting!



*Above, the shared display of City Green and GVCEC at the Flower and Garden Show*

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