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By: Sean O' Brien
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SOW YOUR OATS: Green manure will revitalise your soil

Green manures, while they don't sound very pleasant, are a great way to revitalise soils and garden beds.

The idea of green manure is to grow a crop for the purpose of digging it back into the soil. They are fast growing, easy to grow, and bring many benefits. These include improvements to the soil structure from digging the crop in and from the roots penetrating deep into the soil profile to allow water and air movement.

They also add nutrients to the soil, particularly with legumes which trap nitrogen from the air and return it to the soil.

They also allow the soil to rest and recover after constant cultivation which can destroy soil structure after time.

Additional benefits include weed suppression, soil protection from erosion and pest control by providing habitats for frogs, beetles and other natural predators that will hide in the cover of the crop.

There are a variety of crops that you can grow and are readily available from produce stores or garden centres. Mustard seeds, cow peas, oats and millet can all be used and now is the perfect time to plant them.

Rake your beds over and apply your seeds. Give them a light rake over to cover the seeds and water them in well. In about 10 to 14 days your crop should start to appear and it is just a matter of keeping the water up to it.

Once the crop looks like it is about to go to seed, cut it off close to ground level and leave

Q: I'm looking for a low-maintenance lawn which will stand up to the treatment dished out by the kids and will grow well in my area. What do you recommend?

Chris, Adamstown Heights

A: Couch and kikuyu are both hardy grasses that are water-wise and fast growing. They are also cheap and fast to establish and can be grown from seed. They can be a bit weedy in garden beds and in cold weather they will brown off. Buffalo is a little slower growing and a little more expensive but it will keep its colour through winter and will also take a lot more shade than the others. My pick for turf in general is Sir Walter Buffalo for all-round performance.

it there as a mulch. It will regrow, and this can be done a couple of times through the season.

Once you get close to wanting to plant your garden bed out, dig your entire crop into the soil, chopping it up as you go and making sure you dig it through the soil well.

It will take about 30 days for the manure to break down and you can begin planting.

This method of soil improvement is fantastic for the herb and vegie bed and should be done as a part of regular crop rotation.

It can also be done for all your new garden beds.

Sean O'Brien is the horticultural manager of Hunter Valley Gardens. Readers can email questions to weekender@theherald.com.au.