



The Watering Hole

October 2018



Above: Ryegrass aerial seeded into corn. The left image shows the seed immediate following application and the right image shows the ryegrass two weeks post-application.

Cover crops— part two, getting ‘em in the ground

We’re back this month to dig a little deeper on how to get cover crops in the dirt. The most traditional method of planting cover crops is to plant them with a drill or planter like you would your normal cash crops. This option requires some form of tillage or seed bed prep like you would do for beans or corn. You could even broadcast into a tilled field, which cuts down on compaction from heavy equipment. Or, opting to use a no-till drill instead of a standard seed drill or planter may save some time by drilling right into the crop residue and disturbs the soil less while you are waiting for the cover crop to establish.

All three of these methods may be problematic because they are limiting as far as when and what you can plant. For example, often corn doesn’t come off the fields until late October or November, and with Michigan’s unpredictable weather that may be too late to get most cover crops established. Luckily, there are two great methods to get cover crops into standing crops before harvest and get them going with amazing results. Inter-seeding is a method that uses either a tow-behind implement called an inter-seeder or modified high-clearance sprayers that blow seed out of tubes that hang down in between the crop rows. Either method is going to give you better planting options, but they do mean more trips across the field and require specialized equipment.

The last method, and one recently highlighted at a local field day in Barry County, is aerial application of cover crop seed. This method works just like hiring a pilot to spray fungicide or herbicide. It can be done very quickly and efficiently, right into standing crops. This means less equipment on the field, less time and fuel inputs from the farmer, and seed is put on the field with plenty of time to germinate and begin

growing. You may be thinking that you also don’t get great soil-to-seed contact compared to drilling or cultivating, however in many circumstances, leaf and stalk debris after harvest can help cover and incubate the seed well enough to get a good catch. The downsides of aerial seeding are that you must find an experienced pilot that can do the job and it can be slightly more expensive than do-it-yourself methods, but it may be more feasible than you think.

Once you have decided how to plant, you will need to decide what to plant, and there are many options! Luckily the online Midwest Cover Crop Council Crop Decision Tool can help you find a cover crop to fit your farming style. Just enter in the timing of planting, your goals, and planting methods and the online tool will show you which crops will work best. Cover crops that may be suggested generally fall into the categories of brassicas, grasses, legumes, or mixes.

Brassicas include plants like radishes, turnips and rapeseed. Brassicas are generally great for foraging or grazing sources for livestock and they generally have larger tap roots that can help bust up soil compaction and increase water infiltration. Producers should take note that brassicas can be a bit more sensitive to residual herbicide from later applications. Most brassicas will also winter kill, so they may not provide as much cover on the ground come spring.

Cover crop grasses include annual rye grass and cereal grains such as cereal rye, oats and wheat. Like brassicas, many grasses can be part of a grazing system for livestock owners. Most grasses can also be chopped and baled for livestock. Grasses, especially annual rye, tend to have great root systems for busting soil compaction, holding soil in place, and reducing erosion on fields. One thing to take note of is that in the spring, some grasses can begin to grow quickly and

can get out of hand fast. Careful planning is needed to time the burn down if using herbicides to terminate these cover crops.

Legume cover crops include plants like clover, winter peas and hairy vetch. Legumes are great at “fixing” nitrogen- which means converting it into a form that can be utilized by other crops. Some options of legumes won’t provide great compaction busting or erosion control when compared to other cover crop categories.

Last, but not least, are cover crop mixes, which are a combination of any or all the previously mentioned categories. With a cover crop mix you get more varied benefits across the board. Where one type of crop may fall short, another may pick up the slack so that both plants are mutually benefiting each other as well as achieving more of your goals. The things to watch out for when planting a mixture is that application can be a bit less even when applying different size seeds at the same time and the prices for mixtures will generally be quite a bit more when compared to planting a single variety.

Soil health and water quality are important to us all and it’s up to us to protect them. Cover crops are a great way to address these issues while still looking out for a farm’s bottom line. If you are interested in learning more about cover crops or projects and programs in your area that help with cover crops, contact your local Watershed Coordinator David. He may be contacted for more information on his project or for assistance by email at david.comeau@macd.org or by calling 269-908-4099.

