

Bare Ground won't Stay Bare for Long

Tuesday, September 8, 2009

Bare ground won't stay bare for long. We dress her up in cover crops. This is one of the best ways to build soil humus. Most of our vegetables are in and out within three months, so there's plenty of time for growing crops just for the soil. Since I don't want weeds, I plant cover crops. The potato field was planted in buckwheat and fall Chinese cabbages right after we finished harvesting on July 29th. A month later we dug up and transplanted the Chinese cabbage and bok choy into garden beds. The buckwheat was two feet tall, blooming like crazy and full of insectual activity.

I mowed her down and spread 18 loads of black and beautiful, biodynamic compost onto that acre and then re-broke the soil. I mixed up a bushel (50 lbs.) of buckwheat seed with five pounds of crimson clover seed and two pounds of daikon radish seed. This made three buckets of seed mix, each bucket containing about three gallons of buckwheat, a quart of crimson clover and a pint of radish seeds.

I quiet myself. Steadily, I pace the field broadcasting the mix. Each handful covers a swath about 15 feet wide. I became mechanical; with every few steps an arch of seeds spreads into the sky. The seeds raise a tiny cloud of dust as they hit the ground. There is an art to sowing seeds and nothing but doing it will improve your skills. Every moment is just like the last one. I cover the seed with a log drag behind the re-breaker. In gratitude I took my hat off and say thank you, and then look for more bare ground. I find it in the freshly harvested melon patch, and this time I don't add the radish seed. I'm hoping it comes up in rows, so that harvesting it will be easier. The buckwheat and clover are broadcast.

Back in the garden, the cucumbers and summer squash patches are petering out. They are still producing, but not much, and the quality is not as high as I would like. So I mow them down, work up the soil and sow seeds. These patches get mustard and turnips in the mix.

Buckwheat jumps up fast and, in a week, the bare ground has a green dress. In two weeks, underneath its cover, tiny clover and the other seeds have sprouted. By a month, the buckwheat has created a white, flowered garment full of life, and the plants underneath are wishing for more light.

Jack Frost comes to the rescue and lays the frost tender buckwheat down. Now the brassicas claim the field. Giant daikons, colorful turnips, or a coat of kale, mustard and other greens cover the ground. All fall, the clover hides under these green skirts, and there is plenty to eat. Old Man Winter then lays everything low, except the hardy cover. By late April, mama puts a red dress on and look out, because I'll soon be plowing and sowing seeds again in May.