

Fall Crops

Written by Jeff Poppen
Tuesday, August 21, 2012

By mid-August I have changed my box of seeds. The last of the summer crops are planted, and it's time for the fall ones. Although a few rows and beds of cabbage and lettuce are in to make transplants, I patiently wait until August 15 before I go crazy.

The onion field brings fond memories. 50 bushels of large yellow bulbs grew here, many of which are hanging in the barn. Onions must like hot dry weather to cure, because we had very little rotten ones.

After bush hogging the weeds, a bucket of buckwheat gets two double handfuls of crimson clover mixed in it. Then I look in my box of brassica seed, and I choose Rutabega. I pace the length of the field and back, tossing the mixture of three very different species high into the air.

A restful is slowly released as my arm arches through the air. The seeds scatter beneath the sky and fall a few inches apart in a 20 foot wide swath. Four gallons of seed take me down the field and back, an area of about $\frac{1}{4}$ acre.

Buckwheat is a fast growing, summer cover crop. In a month it will be two foot tall and full of white flowers. Bees love it, and buckwheat brings in lots of other insects, too. Lime in the soil is made more accessible for the next crop after buckwheat has been grown.

Crimson Clover is a winter cover crop. It is very slow to grow at first and can get taken over by weeds if sown alone. Buckwheat acts as a nurse crop for crimson clover, shading out the weeds and allowing it to get established. As a legume, it adds nitrogen to the soil.

The handful of Rutabega seed is just one of the many kinds of Brassica family members who love the fall. Frost kills the buckwheat, and the Brassicas take over the field until winter. All along the clover hides underneath the leaf canopy. Awaiting March and April to grow and bloom in its bright red glory.

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Long Black Spanish radish is the Brassica that goes into the lower half of the old onion field. I then pull the chisel plow with the spike-tooth harrows behind to cover up the seed. I wanted to follow with a cultipacker, but didn't get to.

The next fields were where the potatoes grew, and they get the same treatment. Bok Choy, Michihili Cabbage and Calabras sprouting broccoli are in one spot, and collards are in the lower side. Another field has mustard on one side and kale on the other.

An old corn patch is slated for turnips and diakons, but we got interrupted by cattle escapees. Running them out of a field of winter squash was saddening, but planting Red Russian and Siberian Kale cheered me back up. A gentle rain fell last night to tuck the newly planted seeds in their new homes. Good things will happen in these beds under the covers of beneficial, soil improving cover crops.