

Speaker 1: [00:00](#) Welcome to the old fashioned on purpose podcast. What if I told you that there was a very organic and very affordable way to not only fertilize your soil but also to increase organic matter, suppress the weeds and prevent erosion? Sounds almost too good to be true, doesn't it? Well, I think I have found an option that you're gonna love today. I am so thrilled to have Parker from true leaf market. Joining me today on the podcast truly is an amazing non GMO seed company that is pretty much a homesteaders dreams store online. They carry all sorts of garden seeds, sprouting kits, and everything in between. Parker is joining me today to talk about cover crops. Now cover crops are something I have been aware of for a while, but whenever I would try to research them, I was always left with more questions than answers.

Speaker 1: [01:04](#) We're solving that today. So keep on listening for all the why's and how's of putting cover crops in your garden. And timing is everything with these. And because we're reaching the end of the season in many areas, you're probably gonna want to implement this right away. I'm your host Jill winger. And for the last 10 years I've been helping people just like you who feel a little bit disenchanted by modern life. I'll show you how to leave the rat race and create the life you really want by learning how to grow your own food and master old fashioned skills. So without further ado, I am so excited to have Parker from truly here with me today. Thanks for jumping on the old fashioned on purpose podcast, Parker. You bet. Thanks for having me. Yeah, so this is going to be a really fun topic and I'm really excited to have you on because this is not a topic that I really have in my own personal wheel house yet. So we are talking cover crops and all the amazing things they can do for your garden. And let's start off this topic. Parker, just kind of give me a little background on yourself and also truly for market. You bet. So

Speaker 2: [02:22](#) I am, one of the partners in true leaf and my kind of department is marketing. And as far as my expertise, I'm a little bit more focused on our microgreens. So I've been growing micro greens for 20 some odd years. And some of our other partners are a little more conversant on different topics like sprouts or wheat grass or traditional gardening, those types of things. But we're all, there's quite a bit of overlap between all of us and we are a full service seed company. We also have a lot of growing supplies in addition to selling a large line of good old fashioned gardening seeds, including heirlooms and organics. We also, take a lot of specialty areas like cover crops, like, flowers and herbs, sprouts, micro grains, grains and grasses, those types of things.

- Speaker 1: [03:18](#) Yeah, and I was, you know, I've been working with you guys for a while and some different sponsorship relationships. But I was just spinning a little bit of time on your website before we jumped on today. You guys have number one, a beautiful website. Number two, it's really like very much full service. Like you said, it's got a lot of options that you don't see in your typical garden seed catalogs or websites. So it's a really fun place. If you're homestead gardener like I am, to go spend some time clicking around.
- Speaker 2: [03:51](#) Well thank you. We work hard at making it a good selection and an informative site and easy to use.
- Speaker 1: [03:57](#) Yeah. So, let's just dive on in. So a few minutes ago before we jumped on, I posted a very quick informal poll on my prairie homestead Facebook page and I asked people if they were currently using cover crops, you know, or what their experience with them was. And so far the overwhelming response has been, I don't know what the heck you're talking about. What is a cover crop? So can we start there? Can you please tell us quick definition, what exactly is a cover crop?
- Speaker 2: [04:28](#) You bet. So a cover crop is a, is a very sustainable, very natural technique to rehabilitate your soil either after the growing season is over for your garden. Or you can also do it in this, in the early, early spring before your growing season. So more than anything, what you're doing is you're adding green biomass back into the soil. Different cover crops will have different benefits like some cover crops like mustards for example, tend to, uh, tend to discourage nematodes while a driller radish for example, will, uh, air rate and break up the soil and other crops like deep-rooted crops like alfalfa will pull nutrients up from the deep soil up into kind of the plant layer of soil. They do a control, they do a variety of things, but the main purpose of a carbon crop is to plant like the, and I'll give you an example of how you would use it, right?
- Speaker 2: [05:31](#) You plant your garden, you harvest all of your garden vegetables, probably by what, late August, early September. Then at that point you seed with a cover crop and a cover crop again can be something like a winter rye. Our most popular crop by a mile is our mix that contains eight or nine or 10 different varieties of cover crops that provide different benefits. You see, you let that grow and depending on your approach, you can either mow that down at the end of the season, you can allow it, depending on how cold an area you're in, you can allow it just to winter kill. You probably don't want it to go to seed cause you'll get some volunteers the next season. But you would, you

would let that just lie on top of the soil through the winter. Whether you, whether you mow it or weather it, it winter kills. And then in the spring, depending again on your strategy, there's, you know, everybody has a different technique with when it comes to gardening, right?

Speaker 2: [06:29](#) And there's no right or wrong approach. But if you, if you're somebody inclined to till then you might till that, that biomass under, you want to do that probably two or three weeks before you plant your garden and it enriches your soil. It brings nutrients into the soil. Some, you know, some cover crops like legumes for example, will pull nitrogen out of the air, you plant it in your or, or utility under and you've added a lot of nitrogen to your soil. So it's a very natural kind of fertilizer. It just depends on what you're trying to accomplish. But again, a good all-purpose is a good fit, and then you've got a lot stronger, richer soil ready to grow, kind of a green manure kind of an approach.

Speaker 1: [07:16](#) Hm. So what I'm hearing you say is there's more than one reason I might want to do this. Sure. So you said it would improve soil health, it would fix nitrogen, right? Yup. Um, prevent nematodes add more organic matter. What else did I miss? A lot of good information there.

Speaker 2: [07:34](#) Erosion control. It can break up the soil again. It can pull nutrients from deep in the soil. Um, it can control nematodes, you know, different cover crops, do different things. But again, we've got our garden cover crop mix is are our absolute most popular by far. It's got a blend of all of these different seeds that do all of these different benefits. So planting that at the end of the season, letting it grow through until winter kill or again mow it down. You probably don't want to let it go to seed. Some people prefer that, some people prefer it and to let it go to seed and yeah, they'll have some volunteers but you've got beneficial plants in your garden next to your, your primary crops. Right, right. But I'm a little too OCD for that myself. Okay.

Speaker 1: [08:24](#) So basically, yeah. And so it sounds like the mix is definitely a good option for those of us who aren't sure quite how to diagnose what we need. The mix covers everything.

Speaker 2: [08:34](#) It's a very good all-purpose cover crop. Yeah. So different cover crops do different things. You know in a garden you might steer away from alfalfa because it's a perennial, you're going to have that, you know, controlling that and getting rid of it is going to be tough. But for a lot of farms and and bigger agriculture alfalfa's a very strong carpet crop but might not be a good fit for

a garden. But for a general all-purpose garden, our garden cover crop mixes is probably the place to start.

Speaker 1: [09:01](#) Okay. Okay. So this is my next question because in the past I've never done cover crops for listeners, I have not tried this yet. I have looked at them several times in the past and the thing that always stops me from pulling the trigger is the timing. So for example, and this is why I was excited, well one of the reasons I was excited to have you on today Parker cause I'm like maybe he can help me figure this out. Um, we are in zone five and it's a, it's a pretty harsh zone. Five like we are going to get our first frost either tonight or tomorrow, which is a little bit late. Usually it's kind of mid September. Um, and then we don't get, we don't plant til the end of may and we get a lot of wind and nastiness in between. So I just pulled out a lot of my plants, my potatoes and tomatoes and peppers. They came out yesterday. So they just came out. Yeah. You know, in with the frost impending. And I'm like, how could I, what I have time to plant a cover crop now or is it kind of too late?

Speaker 2: [10:03](#) No, it's a, it depends, right? So there's different kinds of cover crops. Our cover crop, our garden seed cover crop mix is a cold weather blend, which means it'll grow in warmer weather, but it will, it will grow sometimes slowly depending on zone five. So in zone five, where are you like Colorado, Montana type territory?

Speaker 1: [10:24](#) Southeast Wyoming. Yeah. So Colorado.

Speaker 2: [10:26](#) Yeah. So there you go. So, um, so our garden cover crop seed mix, winter rye, most of the carbon crops we sell on our site are colder weather crops. The only one that's kind of a warm weather crop is, is a buckwheat. Right. So for timing in a place like Wyoming, Montana, the Dakotas, that type of, that type of colder area, Minnesota, what you're, what you're typically gonna look, look at is starting that carbon crop very soon after your final harvest of the year, right? So you're probably pulling out what pumpkin's as late as anything, right? As soon as that's done late September, mid September, late September, early October, uh, what you'll want to do is, is seed that garden at that point with cover crop. Let it grow. As long as it'll grow and it'll, and most of it will probably just winter kill. Okay. Let that sit on top of the garden.

Speaker 2: [11:27](#) And if you're, if, and again, some people will tell, some people don't tell I'm a little too OCD, I like to till it, but it's very popular to do a no-till, let it sit on top as a mulch. It still provides a lot of the benefit without, you know, disturbing the soil. Right? Uh, but that's, that's typically your timing. Now you can also plant

cover crops in the spring. As soon as it gets the earliest hint of warmness, and without the threat of a of a real serious overnight frost is gone. Seed your garden there, let it grow as much as possible and then you want to mow it down or till it under, two to three weeks before you're ready to plant your garden so that that green bio-mass has time to decompose and provide the benefits to the soil. Does that, did that answer your timing question?

Speaker 1: [12:25](#)

Yes. Perfect. It did. Because you know what, when I've Googled it in the past, they would say, Oh, the best time to plant your cover crop is August. And I'm like, Mmm, we're not even having tomatoes on the plant in August. It's like weird late here. So I'm like, that's not going to work, but this sounds more doable. Like I maybe even could place an order this week and get it planted because we'll probably like freeze tonight, but it always warms up again for a little while or it should. This year has been really weird, so I'm not making it a guarantee. So it will warm up and then get cold or warm up and get cold so that feasibly should give those time.

Speaker 2: [13:00](#)

Yeah, you should. You should be fine. It, it being the end of the last day of September right now. Um, we haven't really got to a point where we've hit our peak cover crop sales now again, USDA zones being what they are. If you're in Texas, man, you can, you can plant this in, in December, January, you're going to be fine. Right? If you're in central South Texas. In Wyoming, yeah. You want to probably get it in the ground, um, as early as possible. Just immediately right after you've harvested the last of your your crops, right? Uh, but I would say September you're probably pretty safe. The good news is cover crops are a very cheap way to fertilize soil, right? I think, uh, I can't, I don't know what our pricing is off the top of my head, but a pound, a cover crop seed is, you know, like six or eight bucks, something like that for our garden cover crop mix and a pound a cover crop seed on our mix, uh, should do about 600 square feet. Right. Wow. That's a, it's a pretty decent, it's a pretty decent area, um, for pretty cheap. So you know, you, you might experiment for a year or two and find your, your correct timing, but you know, it's not like a huge financial commitment if you missed the Mark a Little bit. And then probably the worse case, the worst case is you're probably gonna have a little less biomass than you optimally would. Okay. You still still get quite a bit of benefit.

Speaker 1: [14:26](#)

Sure, sure. And that is like you said, that that's a pretty, um, conservative gamble and definitely cheaper. Like if you have to go buy fertilizer at the store that's cheaper, the seeds are cheaper. Yeah. Yeah. So that, that brings me to my next

question. Would I technically still need to add fertilizer maybe in the spring or will like a soil test be my best bet to know that?

- Speaker 2: [14:50](#) It depends on, you know, again, there's, there's everybody's got an opinion and an approach to gardening and I don't know that there's any right or wrong answer on that. It's a lot of preference. You know, we have a few folks here at true leaf that are very uh, committed. I guess what I, what I would call a very natural approach to gardening. They're not keen on using a chemical fertilizer at all. They might use a natural trace mineral fertilizer they, but cover crops, they rely very heavily on cover crops. We have some that do both. So it's just, it's just a question of your personal preference.
- Speaker 1: [15:30](#) Okay. That makes sense. All right, so I want to shift gears a little bit and shift over to some questions around raised beds. So I have, my garden is primarily in raised beds. I know a lot of my readers also use raised beds. Is this possible? Could we do cover crops in a raised bed?
- Speaker 2: [15:52](#) Absolutely. So my garden is a biz, 100% raised bed, and you can do a cover crop on a raised bed. You treat it no differently than if you weren't using a raised bed.
- Speaker 1: [16:01](#) So that's number one. Good news. Number two, I guess the only thing we'd have to take into consideration is the tilling, cause my beds are pretty high. I'm not gonna be able to lift a rototiller there. That'd be a little crazy. So we'll just have to, if we do go with a tilling approach when we turn the crops over, that'll just be us with the shovel. Right?
- Speaker 2: [16:19](#) Yeah. And that's it. And that's not gonna, that's not really the same as as and as machine tilling. Right. So even some of our folks that are kind of a no till approach are totally comfortable just using a spade to turn it over. It's it, it disturbs the soil a lot less than that's totally adequate. You bet.
- Speaker 1: [16:38](#) When you, I'm just picturing turning it over cause I know like you know we've all tried to dig up areas of grass that have taken over and we're trying to pull out the sod and it's so difficult to get it out. It's just like a nightmare. Yup. Do these seedin such like a thick mat or is it different?
- Speaker 2: [16:54](#) No, it's a, it's a little different. Now we in our, in our garden cover crop mix, uh, we do have some, some grasses like a, like a winter rye, I can't remember if there's a wheat in there but there's definitely winter rye in there. And the benefit of that is it

creates a big biomass. You might get a little bit of that, but that, that root mat, that tied together root mat is part of the bio mass that you want. So the real key is to turn it over, keep it wet as the, and I'm talking about the spring at this point, whether you plant it in the fall or whether you planted in the spring, you want, you want to turn it over or at least mow the crop down and give it a chance to decompose for two or three weeks before you plant your garden. So even though even those root mats, right, that are kind of tied together, that feel clumpy again, if you're a little OCD, you're thinking, I gotta take care of that. If you just let it decompose, that's what you're looking for.

- Speaker 1: [17:51](#) Okay. So we're not going to have these big maps like, which is grass because it's like our nightmare. Right. So we won't be dealing with that.
- Speaker 2: [17:58](#) Yeah. A little bit of warmth and a little bit of moisture should take care of that. Fantastic. Okay.
- Speaker 1: [18:05](#) One of the issues that I have in my raised beds, I don't know if you deal with this at all, maybe you don't because you have cover crops is I've noticed that as some of my beds are three or three years old, um, they settle. I think it's a combination of settling and just some top soil loss. And so this last spring we had to drive to town, which is 40 miles away, pay for top soil haul it home, and then manually of course wheelbarrow it to each bed and it took forever. And I was like, I don't want to do that again. Would cover crops be able to help support that top soil or kind of keep that loss to a minimum?
- Speaker 2: [18:37](#) I think it can minimize the loss because what's your, what's your basically doing is you're, you're added biomass. Uh, and the more the, you know, the more you allow the cover crop to grow and the bigger the bio mass you have, the more that's going to support that. So it just depends on how much you're adding to the soil. But yeah, that that should minimize the need to do that or less than the frequency that you've got. You've got to supplement.
- Speaker 1: [19:01](#) Right. Okay. That's good. That would be amazing cause that was not a fun project. The spring.
- Speaker 2: [19:05](#) Indeed.
- Speaker 1: [19:06](#) Yeah. Okay. So for those of us, I'm a visual learner. Well sometimes you just need to hear things a couple times. So I just

like to picture how this is going to work. I'm planting it this week. I'm going to let you know I water it. I guess I, if I can or let the rain or snow water it

- Speaker 2: [19:24](#) that just to get it established, I'd make sure it's got plenty of water. If the weather will support that, that's great. Um, but yes, you want to, you want to plant it as soon as you can, given your zone. Um, and what I would do is I would, uh, I would smooth out your soil a little bit, broadcast it by hand. If you use a mechanical broadcast or the problem with a seed mix, is it in the, in the broadcasters it tends to stratify a little bit. Hmm. So broadcasting by hand tends to eliminate that, that seed stratification a little bit, broadcast it by hand and just rake it under. Right. You're, you're talking about a planting depth of anywhere from surface to maybe half an inch. Right. And you're going to get a blend of that. Okay. Keep it nice and wet. Encourage the growth as much as possible. And then in your zone, you should be fine letting it just grow to a winter kill.
- Speaker 1: [20:14](#) Okay.
- Speaker 2: [20:15](#) Let that sit. Yup. So go ahead. Go ahead. Yeah. And then let that sit completely over the winter and then as soon as the weather turns it at, at all kind of reasonable for working out there in the yard or in the garden, uh, either, uh, well if you're going to go the Notel route, you just leave it on top, but if you're gonna till it under a or or turn it over with a spade, whatever it is, uh, you want to do that at least again, two to three weeks before you, you're planting the garden earlier is the better. If you can give it four weeks or five weeks, that's great, but as soon as you can, that, uh, know tilled under the soil, that'll start the break down and as it warms up, as the soil is nice and wet and it, that's where the benefit comes.
- Speaker 1: [20:57](#) Yeah,
- Speaker 2: [20:58](#) that sounds easy enough to, it doesn't sound complicated at all.
- Speaker 1: [21:01](#) When you say no till, and I'm just picturing like obviously not tilling, you're leaving it there and then you're just digging out where you would plant your seeds and just kind of planting within it.
- Speaker 2: [21:13](#) You're seeding right through like it's a mulch right on the top. And again, there's, there's different, uh, opinions about that. And, uh, you know, before this podcast, I kind of asked around and I got, I got very strong opinions on from different folks in

our, our company, on how they approach gardening. We've got one that's very, very committed to a no-till approach. And I said, isn't that a little OCD? I mean, I'm too OCD to have all that stuff on the top of my garden in between my plants. And she said, well, you gotta you just got to get to a point where you tamp that down because it's better for the soil and other people said till it. So it's just really a personal preference thing. I don't, I don't know that we're hardcore committed to one approach or the other as a company. Um, even though we have individuals that are within the organization.

- Speaker 1: [22:04](#) Sure. You know, that reminds me or it makes me think of, um, in years passed on the deep mulch method that was made popular by Ruth Stout where she just basically says, put 10 inches of hay or straw over your garden and then you just pull it back and plant in the mass. And it kind of reminds me of that. It's not great for OCD, like you said, it's kind of like, Oh my gosh, it's messy and there's stuff everywhere. It works. But, you know, I think it can work either way. So that's, that's helpful. Um, exactly right. Yup. Awesome. All right, well that really answers my questions. Are there any other tips or tricks you want to share with listeners before we sign off today
- Speaker 2: [22:45](#) in, in the realm of cover crop? I don't, I don't think so. It's, it's not a very complicated process. I mean, what you're basically doing is you're just basically using a natural technique and a sustainable technique to add, uh, biomass and revitalize the soil. I don't know there was any real tricks to it. It's, it's a pretty straightforward idea. It's a practice that is gaining a lot more popularity. Um, and we're, we're seeing, we're seeing a lot of growth in, in the sale of our cover crop seeds, which I think means more gardeners are adopting the practice.
- Speaker 1: [23:16](#) I love it. That's good news.
- Speaker 2: [23:18](#) You bet. Yeah.
- Speaker 1: [23:20](#) Alrighty. Well I appreciate so much you dump it on with me today. This was so informative. I learned a ton and I am going to go order some seeds like literally right now. So thank you so much. Thank you so much for having me.
- Speaker 1: [23:31](#) Well I don't know about you but I am feeling totally inspired after that interview, if you would like all of the details we talked about today in one easy to find place, we have put together a super printable to help you keep all the facts straight. Go to [theprairiehomestead.com/cover](http://theprairiehomestead.com/cover) to grab this principle for free. That's [theprairiehomestead.com/cover](http://theprairiehomestead.com/cover) and that is it. My

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