Cover Crops

A cover crop is a crop planted primarily to manage soil. They:

- Are easy to start and manage.
- Produce lots of organic matter, above and below the ground.
- Reduce all forms of erosion.
- Can serve as a living mulch.
- Can control weeds.
- Can be used as a "green manure", or a completely plant source fertilizer and soil conditioner.

Points to remember when using them:

- Should killed and decomposed for 4 weeks + before attempting to start seed in the bed. Less fussy for transplants.
- Will need watered during growing season if no rain. Bare soil loses water too, so this is a reasonable investment.
- Winter is a great time to use cover crops in beds that will grow summer crops. They use little water or care, build and protect the soil, and will complete their life cycle by summer planting.
- If you will double dig a bed, that's a good time to incorporate the cover crop. If you follow the more recommended no-till methods, you'll probably still need to kill and decompose the cover crop to get the benefits. Mow close, or chop with hoe, water well, and cover with thick mulch.
- You can harvest surplus growth for composting.
- You might plant climate adapted mix, including perennials, that you won't harvest, but will establish as long-term, living erosion control.

What are the benefits of cover crops?

- Increases organic matter and available nitrogen
- Increases earthworms and beneficial microorganisms
- Stabilizes soil to prevent erosion
- Brings deep-rooted minerals to the surface
- Improves water, root and air penetration of soil
- Increases the soil's moisture-holding capacity
- Breaks up subsoil and plow-soles
- Provides aesthetic value and color
- Provides habitat, nectar, and pollen for beneficial insects while choking out weeds

Soil Improvement Resources

http://www.sare.org/Learning-Center/Books
Free downloadable copies of *Managing Cover Crops Profitably* and *Building Soils for Better Crops.*

https://www.groworganic.com/cover-crops/annual-cover-crops.html
Link to printable guide to cover crops, videos, mail ordering.

http://covercrops.cals.cornell.edu/
Articles and crop specific growing information.

http://aces.nmsu.edu/pubs/_a/A146/welcome.html
Introduction to getting and understanding a soil test, with contact information for testing labs

http://www.ext.colostate.edu/mg/Gardennotes/214.html
Instructions fot determining soil texture, like we used at the Mar. 2 meeting.

https://attra.ncat.org/publication.html

List of mostly free downloads covering a huge range of garden, farm and soil topics, focused on sustainable agriculture.