
Covering Ground

A Discussion on Ground Cover

Soil Health

Ground cover refers to any materials that cover the soil protecting it from sun, rain and wind. The best ground covers are living vegetation and mulches/plant debris. Ground cover is a management tool that helps reduce erosion, hold moisture, regulate soil temperature, keep weeds in check, and support biodiversity. It also ties into key regenerative principles; keeping the soil covered, whether with crop or crop residue, helps armor the surface from wind, rain, and temperature. And when that cover includes a living root, it actively feeds soil microbes, supports nutrient cycling, and strengthens soil structure over time.

Types of Ground Cover: Cover Crops

Cover crops are used as ground cover to keep living roots in the soil between cash crops. What you plant usually depends on what was in the field last, what's going in next, and what the soil needs. Some use a single species, others go with a mix—it all depends on the goals and context. Cover crop components include:

- Grains
- Legumes
- Brassicas
- Grasses
- Forbs

Types of Ground Cover: Crop Residue

After a crop is harvested, leftover plant material (like stems, stalks, roots, and leaves) is called crop residue. Instead of removing it, farmers can choose to leave this residue on the field as ground cover, thereby avoiding bare soil.

Ground Cover Doubles as Forage

Ground cover, whether it is from cover crops or leftover crop residue, can also double as forage for livestock. Grazing animals on these covers helps cycle nutrients back into the soil, especially when their manure is left behind. Practices like bale grazing, where hay is brought onto a field for animals to feed on, are another way to link livestock and ground cover.