

## Using Crimson Clover (*Trifolium incarnatum*) as Cover Crop

This plant is usually used in agriculture. After 3 years growing other crops (and occasionally sooner), the soil is depleted of its nitrogen. How do we get the nitrogen back into the soil? We can add it via an organic or synthetic chemical, but that does nothing for soil structure. Structure (and having adequate organic matter is so important for healthy soil.

Though using a cover crop is very common in agriculture, it can be helpful for ornamental landscaping, particularly when starting new gardens on poor soil. Plant *Trifolium incarnatum* as a ground cover / green manure over any soil you want to make more healthy and fertile. It takes the better part of a year to work, but it is a good time to do the essential planning necessary to ensure your landscape will enjoy success.

*Trifolium incarnatum* as a cover crop works for a few reasons:

- 1) *Trifolium* (clover) is a legume and this type of plant is able to work with specific soil bacteria to 'fix' nitrogen from the air and put it into the soil. This happens only after the plant dies. While the plant is living, it is supplying nitrogen for its own use in little nodules it grows on its roots.
- 2) *T. incarnatum* has a vibrant root system that helps break up hard soils as it grows, thus sort of tilling the soil for you.
- 3) Once *T. incarnatum* dies (or you deliberately kill it), it begins to decay (compost). As the plant decomposes, the root nodules release the nitrogen (via microbes) into the soil to nourish whatever it is you will plant next.
- 4) If you leave the roots in place after cutting the plant down, and I suggest leaving the top-growth in place as well, that organic matter will compost in place. And THAT helps create good soil structure. It also feeds the microbes which, in turn, make nitrogen and other nutrients for the next plant you install into your soil.

You can grow *Trifolium incarnatum* over areas to be later used as vegetables, orchard, ornamental gardens and turf lawn. Here is some good info on how to use it:

[https://plants.usda.gov/plantguide/pdf/pg\\_trin3.pdf](https://plants.usda.gov/plantguide/pdf/pg_trin3.pdf)

<http://www.oregonclover.org/downloads/files/CoverCropBrochure.pdf>

[http://www.territorialseed.com/product/Crimson\\_Clover\\_Cover\\_Crop\\_Seed/legume\\_cover\\_crop](http://www.territorialseed.com/product/Crimson_Clover_Cover_Crop_Seed/legume_cover_crop) — where to buy seeds.

Don't be fooled that this wonder plant with bright red flowers is not called RED clover.

The plant with the common name 'red clover' has PINK-PURPLE flowers and is called *Trifolium pratense*.

The plant with the common name 'crimson clover' has RED flowers and is called *Trifolium incarnata*.

You need to use red-flowered *T. incarnata* because the pink-purple flowered stuff is INVASIVE!!!! In fact, do not make the mistake and ask for red clover, you will certainly get the pink-purple flowered invasive stuff because red clover is the common name of the pink-purple flowered species.

This is exactly why we don't like it when people use common names to identify plants. Why the name red clover was given to a plant with pink-purple flowers is beyond me, but it is what it is.

Always ask for plants using their correct botanical name. It avoids confusion and you get exactly what you want.