

Top crops

Not sure which cover crop to plant? Peter Thompson gives his definitive guide to the top crops



Peter Thompson is our biodiversity advisor and an expert on farmland habitat and wildlife. In 2013 he was a finalist in the Farmers Weekly advisor awards.

Maize

Advantages

A wonderfully reliable crop for holding game and allows excellent control of broad-leaved weeds, so can be useful in a cover crop rotation.

Disadvantages

Can attract rats and badgers. It is not funded within Stewardship and does not offer food for smaller birds. Can only reliably be grown as far north as the Scottish borders, depending on the variety.

Growing

Drill at 20-30 inch rows. Plant seed at 2-3 inches deep. Plant in May at about 45,000 seeds per acre.



Sorghum/dwarf grain sorghum

Advantages

Similar to maize so can be kept clear of broad-leaved weeds. Does not have cobs, so unattractive to rats. Some varieties of dwarf grain sorghum produce seed heads and can be used in Stewardship mixes (but do not count towards one of the three crop types needed) and they stand well throughout the winter.

Disadvantages

Most varieties have no feed value, so hopper feeding will be required. Does not like cold, wet summers.

Growing

Drill at 22lbs an acre in May or June. Different varieties vary widely, so take advice.



Fertiliser

All cover crops will need fertiliser if they are to succeed.

Millet

Advantages

A fantastic addition to any cover crop mix as gamebirds and small birds love the seed. Red millet ripens and sheds seed first, so is good for partridge cover. White millet seed lasts in the head much longer and can still be available to eat in January.

Disadvantages

Does not like heavy, wet soils.

Growing

Drill 11lbs an acre of seed at around half an inch deep in May or June.



Kale

Advantages

This crop, grown well is the king of game cover crops – especially if it is left into a second year. It provides warm cover, is very hardy, and produces stacks of small seeds that many birds love to eat. Great to include in a mix – economic as it lasts for two years.

Disadvantages

It can be difficult to establish, however, you can buy treated seed to help beat flea beetle attack.

Growing

Drill or broadcast (treated seed must be drilled) from April to mid-June depending on conditions. Rate of seed varies from 3-5lbs an acre depending on whether it's drilled/broadcast or included in a mix.



Triticale

Advantages

A hybrid wheat/rye crop which stands right through the winter – only heavy snow knocks it over. It grows well on poor ground and does not need much nutrient to thrive. Excellent to use in a mix. Rabbits, hares and deer don't like to eat it when it is growing. Offers a good food supply well into the new year for a wide range of birds.

Disadvantages

It can attract rats, rooks and pigeons.

Growing

Drill winter varieties in the autumn, and spring varieties from March to the end of May. Check seed rate with supplier as it varies depending on a number of factors.



* Stop press – key information

Farmers growing kale would have been perturbed to learn of the EU Commission ban on neonicotinoid seed treatments, which protect the young, emerging kale plants from flea beetle attack. Previously we had to resort to spraying but timing is critical and many crops have failed when sprays were missed. However, kale seed treatments have been excluded from the ban by the EU and treated seed is available for the 2014 season.

See pages 36-37 for more conservation targeted advice.

Quinoa

Advantages

Easy to grow and ideal to plant as part of a mix.

Disadvantages

Does not offer much cover and little remains of the crop by January.

Growing

Drill or broadcast at around 3.5lbs an acre from April through to June.

Grow quinoa as part of a mix. It works well with kale.



Sunflowers

Advantages

Offers a wonderful sight through until the autumn and produces stacks of seed, which game and small birds love to eat. Use as part of a mix. Consider the dwarf, multi-headed varieties.

Disadvantages

Does not offer much cover, so should be included with other crops that provide warmth.

Growing

Can be sown in May and June, once soils have warmed up sufficiently. Sowing rate depends on variety and what it is mixed with – talk to the supplier.



Fodder radish

Advantages

A fast growing brassica, which is ideal to include within a mix. The pods are slow to ripen, so seeds are not eaten until late in the year when many other seeds have gone. The seed is loved by many bird species.

Disadvantages

Can become too much of a good thing if too high a seed rate is used, dominating other species in the mix and collapsing into a soggy mess.

Growing

Easy to grow, but check seed rate with supplier as the sowing rate will vary depending on the other crops you are mixing it with.



Cover crop corner

Kings Game Cover and Conservation Crops supports the Allerton Project at Loddington by providing on-going management advice and seed supply for the game cover and conservation crops on the farm.

The game cover and wild bird seed plots had developed well. However, the very dry period in the summer had held some of the kale within the wild bird seed mixtures back. Although a taller canopy would have been preferred, many of the plots will be kept for two years as the kale develops further. This helps to reduce the workload in terms of re-establishment, but more importantly, supplies valuable canopy and nectar flower in the spring and summer along with a great source of seed in the following winter.

A beneficial rotation is developing within the plots by growing brassica and cereal-based wild bird seed mixtures along with occasional strips of maize for game cover. This rotation helps to reduce the build-up of soil-borne disease such as club-root and provides weed control opportunities. Each of the crops planted has an agreed herbicide strategy prior to planting, which is essential if they are to establish successfully.

Supplementary feeding started in late December and will run through to the end of May. This option sees the provision of a seed mixture of wheat, oilseed rape, sunflowers, canary seed and millet along tracks and adjacent to areas of wild bird seed mixture three times a week. Farmland birds have responded well to this seed source with a wide range of species being seen.

With plans to improve existing margins and develop the on-going nectar flower and wildflower establishment trials, there is plenty to be working on this spring.

Game cover training day

Come and see the cover crops for yourself at the Kings and NGO training day on Wednesday 26 March at the Allerton Project, Loddington, Leicestershire. Designed specifically for game managers, the day aims to give targeted advice on crop management techniques and how they can be incorporated into the latest farming initiatives. To book please contact Kings on 0800 587 9797 or email kingscrops@frontierag.co.uk