

Alternatives to Clover for Nursery Middles

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Several producers have inquired about alternatives to Crimson Red Clover as a winter cover crop for nursery middles due to an increase in the price of the seed of clover. After extensive discussions with our UT Extension Forage Specialist concerning the characteristics of several different forages it appears that the small grains offer great benefits with few or no problems.

Rye or wheat could be seeded in Sept-Oct and die with hot weather much like the clover. We do advise against annual ryegrass and perennial ryegrass as being too aggressive and perhaps more difficult to kill before the next growing season.

Rye and wheat are annual crops that die after producing seed. Mowing prior to heading will thicken the foliage. Mowing or cultivation during late heading, but prior to seed maturation, will allow little regrowth and the plants will eventually die.

I like the advantage of being able to kill them with Envoy Plus, Fusilade or Segment if you wanted to broadcast them and use them as frost protection over seedlings. It might reduce heaving. The standing dead plants would serve as effective mulch, delaying weed seed germination within the middles, just like crimson clover until the sun reaches the soil and stimulates germination of the weed seed that are present.

Rye or wheat can be an effective substitute for clover: foot and vehicular traffic will be supported, erosion reduced, weed growth will be suppressed as long as the foliage shades the soil, organic matter will be added to the soil eventually and wildlife may prefer to eat this rather than the nursery crop.

Rye or wheat can be seeded later than clover but will not generate the 30-40 pounds of actual nitrogen per acre that inoculated clover would.

The seeding rate is 1.5 bushels per solid acre. The seeding rate should be adjusted for the width of the drill and the width of the middle. Clover seed drills may or may not handle the rye or wheat seed. It needs to be planted 1-2" deep.

Fescue or orchardgrass should be considered if a permanent grass is desired in the middles. Nothing will stunt an ornamental worse than fescue in the root zone area but nothing holds the soil together any better in roadways and slopes to reduce erosion than fescue.

The fungus-free tall fescue is suggested for the middles, because it is not as competitive as the infected fescue. Use the infected fescue on the roadways and grass strips.

Comm/Field/Soil Improvement/Alternatives to clover