Cover Crops Considered, Fall Garden Prep for Protecting Pollinators Pondered

On October 15th we met at the Powderhorn Park Neighborhood Association --thank you (same building as LSP), where we had a great discussion, aka networking, and toured the gardens at Tiny Diner.

Karl Hakanson, UM Extension-Hennepin County and TCMG Network Coordinator, welcomed the group and started things off with a review of soil health principles. Farmers and growers are increasingly adopting these principles as we learn more about the amazing biology beneath our feet: *Keep the soil covered - Minimize soil disturbance - Increase crop diversity - Keep living roots in the soil - Integrate livestock.* That last one isn’t feasible for most small growers and gardeners, but, composted livestock manures can be used to great effect. *Soil is biology not geology!*

Cover crops are key to soil in cropping systems. We had a lively discussion on cover crops in vegetable production with Natalie Hoidal, UM Extension Horticulture and food Systems Educator. She noted that cover crops are great from a soil health point of view, but that it can be challenging to adopt in small spaces where every square foot is at a premium with limited space for cover crops. Hoidal reviewed some of the considerations around using cover crops in vegetable production, including, 1) on new land or fallow land not currently in production, 2) plants that will winter kill, 3) plants that will not winter kill, 4) cover crops after early crops come out, and, 5) low growing covers between rows. She stressed that cover crops should be treated like another crop to achieve the desired results. The Midwest Cover Crop Council decision tool for vegetables: ([mcc.msu.edu/covercroptool/covercroptool.php](http://mcc.msu.edu/covercroptool/covercroptool.php)) can guide growers to cover crops for their situation.

Julie Weisenhorn, UMN Extension Educator, Horticulture, provided great information on taking care of pollinators in the fall as we prepare the garden for winter. When we hear “pollinator habitat”, we think of beautiful native flowers in bloom. We forget that pollinating insects need over-wintering habitat as well. Mason bees in particular, very small and typically unnoticed, lay their eggs in the hollow stems of plants. They can find refuge in our gardens and farms if we pay attention to their needs. Weisenhorn offered tips to make our gardens safe havens for overwintering bees and shared a research brief on assessing whether annual flowers can improve pepper harvest. Basically, if we leave crop and flower stems in and around the garden or create bee “hotels” it can really help our hard-working pollinator friends.

For more on wild bees and habitat needs: [www.beelab.umn.edu/sites/beelab.umn.edu/files/native_bees.pdf](http://www.beelab.umn.edu/sites/beelab.umn.edu/files/native_bees.pdf)

Julie has a great video on Fall Cleanup for Pollinators: [https://youtu.be/TlZWfFHoUmk](https://youtu.be/TlZWfFHoUmk) Also see *Growing landscapes to help bees and other pollinators:* [https://extension.umn.edu/lawns-and-landscapes/flowers-pollinators](https://extension.umn.edu/lawns-and-landscapes/flowers-pollinators)

After a short hike over to Tiny Diner we toured the various gardens packed into this … *wait for it …* tiny site! Andrea Eger, Tiny Diner’s Farm Program Manager highlighted, as darkness descended, the many different plantings and projects surrounding and on top of the restaurant. We saw applications of what had been discussed by Extension educators in a small urban space. We toured Tiny Diner’s honey bee hives as well as their pollinator hotel that provides nesting sites for many different species of native bees. Andrea also talked about her experiments with cover crops this year and how she’s building soil at the Tiny Diner garden.

For more on Tiny Diner’s garden design features [mcc.msu.edu/covercroptool/covercroptool.php](http://mcc.msu.edu/covercroptool/covercroptool.php)
With ingenuity, skill and hard work—and an eye for nature’s way, small spaces can produce food, restore ecological functionality, and provide a pleasant oasis in the urban expanse.

Questions, comments, suggestions? Contact Network Coordinator Karl Hakanson, UMN Extension-Hennepin Co., khakanso@umn.edu / 612.624.7948

Check out the Twin Cities Metro Growers Network web site where you can find more information about these topics and summaries of past events: www.sfa-mn.org/twin-cities-growers-network