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NEWS & REPORT:

Cover Crop Field Day: Soil Health Tour Attracts almost 100 Farmers to Country Pumpkins and Lohse Farms in Glenn County, CA

By Melina Sempill Watts
Photos by Kandi Manhart

When 95 people stand around under grey skies and looming storm clouds to look at plant varieties, while picking apart shovels of saturated soil, exploring root types and soil pore structure, you know there's a compelling idea at play – cover crops. Cover crops ability to renew soil health is remarkable, increasing soil porosity, improving soil organic matter, sequestering carbon, reducing erosion and maintaining, even increasing precious topsoil.

For those looking to understand the value of cover crops, in short, cover crops use biology to help rebuild and restore the value of agricultural topsoil.

The simplest rule when using cover crops in soil health, to quote Certified Crop Advisor (CCA), Steve Gruenwald, is to "Keep it covered." While comparing and contrasting the nine mixes on site at Country Pumpkins, he explained that maybe the idea of letting soil be fallow – or bare – is essentially flawed.

For long-term organic farmer Greg Massa, cover crops have helped to drive fecundity at his family's orchards, in their rice, grazed fields and row crops for years. After the April 3, 2019 soil health event, he noted that he is "...really excited to see how many people were there, for those of us who have been doing cover crops for a while, it has seemed like we were the only ones. Now, many people are talking about how to use cover crops, what kind, what the costs are, how to start."

Brian Lohse of Lockwood Seed and Grain in Willows, CA has been developing cover crop seed blends for years – and staged this soil health tour in partnership with Glenn County Resource Conservation District (GCRCD) for Glenn County growers, starting at County Pumpkins in Orland, CA and moving on to one of his family's orchards over on County Road 29. **What's intriguing is that Gruenwald, CCA and Owner of Growers' Choice, and who co-owns County Pumpkins with his wife Becky, has planted one of each of the nine cover crop mixes so that farmers would have a unique opportunity to walk through samples of a clover mix, a brassica mix, a drought clover mix, another mix geared towards reducing erosion, the SR Mix, the Mutiplex 2 (which looks like the nitrogen special, bell beans, winter peas and vetch,) "and several variations on this last mix, including one with oats, one with triticale and another emphasizing mustard.** Gruenwald dug up soil to demonstrate how each mix impacted his field's soil.

As Massa observed, "My first impression was that it was great that I got to see all of the different cover crops in one place because having just done our CDFA Healthy Soils grant application and talking to Brian Lohse about what crop mixes we should put in, it was excellent to see all these mixes in one place so we could see what we are getting into." He felt that some groups of people on the cover crop tour are already into it, while others attending were looking for help to get started.

Indeed, Lohse observed that, "These field tours are a great opportunity for both farmers and companies to get together and see things growing side by side. We get so busy, the phone rings, emails ting, but to take 20 minutes to actually walk through each of the cover crop blends in the field, and at their prime, to see what you want, that is powerful." He added, "Or, if you want to

do things a little differently, you can make your mix and do it your own way. Some of those mixes are my favorites, but each can make it their own way to make a cover crop for their farm.”

Lohse noted the 95 guests represented thousands of acres in Glenn County and beyond. In particular, he saw decision-makers from four or five of the larger walnut companies at the Lohse Farms stop, so he felt happy to see so much interest from both small and large operations.

To detail, for row crops, this means putting cover crops in during the off season; for orchard crops, this means seeding after harvest to let winter rains raise spring cover crops then knocking them down early or mid-summer to give time for organic detritus to decompose enough to give orchards bare floors required by clean production needed from almond / walnut companies and Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA) standards.

But *what* you keep soil covered with is where the magic happens. The truism is that what kind of cover crops you select as seed depends upon what you hope to achieve (most) for your soil.

- Want to manage in orchard nematode counts? Go with mustard and radish in a brassica mix.
- Want to increase nitrogen fixation? Try legumes such as vetch and peas.
- Want to create delicate pore structure in your soil? Go with cereals.
- Want it all? Go for a mix.

The day held intense beauty, the flowers of all those young plants have their own appeal...and not just for people. **Cover crops provide flower fodder for bees – so in an age of bee colony collapse, providing flower prior to and after the explosive onset of orchard bloom can make all the difference in whether bee colonies thrive or perish.** Bees’ impact on trees’ ability to bear is well-documented so arguably cover crops are even more important for orchard pollination than they are for soil.

More and more growers are making the investment in cover crops, which from the point of long-term topsoil maintenance and soil health – it is the gift that keeps on giving.

Of course, as Kandi Manhart, Executive Officer, GCRCD, observed, there is a great deal of funding available to support farmers looking to try cover crops on their farm. USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) has Farm Bill Funding to support the use of cover crops and other conservation practices, while California Department of Food and Agriculture (CDFA) has the somewhat newer Healthy Soils Grant Program to give additional resources to farmers and help improve soil health.

Lastly, part of the appeal of the day was culinary, as Massa observed regarding the remarkably high attendance, “You served us a fancy lunch.” [Lunch sponsored by Lockwood Seed and Grain - - thank you!]

When it comes to soil health, in Glenn County, our growers are leading the way. Please follow our YouTube channel, Glenn County Resource Conservation District, as we add success stories of how our growers are working to improve their lands. If you are interested in learning more about Soil Health or receiving information about Glenn County Resource Conservation District’s (GCRCD) field days, held in partnership with the USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service and UC Cooperative Extension, please contact Melina Watts via email at melina@glenncountyrcd.org or by calling the GCRCD office at 530-934-4601 x5.

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Country Pumpkins, Orland CA



Lohse Farms, Glenn CA