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COVER CROPS – A GAME CHANGER

Cover crops are one of the most useful tools for managing intensive vegetable growing soils. New research ([Optimising cover cropping for the Australian vegetable industry project](#)) by Hort Innovation found that integrating cover crops into the growing of vegetables improves soil health and on-farm productivity.

Hort Innovation Head of Research and Development Byron de Kock said, “The integration of cover crops into vegetable production can improve soil health by building soil structure and condition, reducing erosion, adding nitrogen, improving nutrient recycling, and contributing to weed and soil-borne disease control.”

The research project completed by delivery partner Applied Horticultural Research, ran from July 2017 to January 2020, involved both research and delivery activities. The field research generated new information on the use and agronomy of cover crops to manage soil structure, soil microbial communities, specific beneficial microbes, and soil-borne diseases in Australia.

Dr Kelvin Montagu from Applied Horticulture Research said, “The new information was combined with practical industry knowledge and international research to deliver information on cover crops to the vegetable industry.” As well as delivering farm walks and Cover Crop Coaching Clinics during the project, growers can continue to access the information through the factsheets, guides, research reports, webinars, podcasts, and videos available on the [Soil Wealth website](#).

Grower, Darren Long, from MG Farms said, “The advancements in cover cropping have been the most advanced single change to farming that I’ve seen for 30 years. It’s an absolute game-changer.”

Byron said, “Cover cropping is revolutionary because it can replace the use of conventional fertiliser, herbicide and even plastic weed mat films and at the same time improve soil health. Growers can log tractor diesel fuel savings as reduced tillage is a hallmark of a cover cropping system. Growers need a full suite of approaches, and although there will always be a need for traditional methods, this new research gives growers the ability to improve on-farm productivity and sustainability.”

Tasmanian grower Deon Gibson, Premium Fresh farm manager said, “It has been a revelation for us. We’ve never had such healthy-looking carrots. There are no nematodes, the crops have beautiful, green, healthy tops and they’re in free-draining soil. And in terms of cultivation, the soil breaks down very easily and has plenty of organic material and worms.”

Cover cropping importance is increasing as vegetable production systems move to “softer” more biological approaches to tillage, integrated crop protection, weed control and nutrition.

This project has filled an important gap, bringing cover crop information together and modifying it specifically for the Australian vegetable industry. This has also occurred across other horticultural and agricultural sectors such as vineyards and broad-acre cropping.

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More information:

- <https://www.horticulture.com.au/growers/help-your-business-grow/research-reports-publications-fact-sheets-and-more/vg16068/>
- <https://www.soilwealth.com.au/resources/>
- Grower video – Ed Fagan (Cowra, NSW) explains how strip tillage and cover cropping complement each other for a successful cucumber crop - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JhyNzdcIE&feature=youtu.be>
- <https://ahr.com.au/cover-crops>