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Lee Draper, of Purple Rooster Organics, surveys a 1-acre plot of land where he and his wife Jaz harvested peanuts, sweet potatoes and corn. Draper planted three varieties of cover crops last winter on this land, and is looking to continue using cover crops this year. Kevin Green/Daily

As farmers looked to find ways to be more efficient, Matt Kowalski, senior conservation specialist at the Lord Fairfax Soil and Water Conservation District, said more producers are turning to cover crops.

The practice of cover crops, Kowalski said, is planting any number of species of plants to “cover” the soil and prevent wind and water erosion damage between seasons.

“Cover crops are really taking advantage of getting something green growing on a field that would otherwise be dead and unprotected,” Kowalski said.

“Most of the time, when people talk about cover crop, we often see them talk about winter cover crop,” Kowalski added. “That’s the biggest amount of participation we see.”

Kowalski said that the district has seen upward of 80 or more cover crop applications in a given season from local producers in Shenandoah, Warren, Frederick, Clarke and Page counties.

The practice is something that variety gardeners Lee and Jaz Draper, of Purple Rooster Organics in Edinburg, are experimenting with as they grow their garden.

This past season, Lee Draper said that they used winter rye, clover and alfalfa species on a single acre of their 10-acre farm. The result, Draper noted, was a significant drop in weeds due to the allelopathic qualities in the rye that suppressed weed seeds.

Kowalski said that cover crops can also benefit the soil by microelements such as nitrogen and phosphorous, which he said boosts the water quality for crops.

“It’s also an advantage for the farmer,” Kowalski added. “When he comes back the following spring, he can till them in, and then all of that organic material and the nutrients get reincorporated into the soil.”

Once the cover crop season was through, Draper said they used that plot of land to plant sweet potatoes, peanuts and an experimental sweet corn variety.

Draper noted that most of those plantings were for personal use – especially the corn variety – but that the crop ended up being of good quality this season.

Although, Draper said that he cannot tell if the use of cover crop resulted in that harvest’s quality – given the sample size – he noted that the practice is something they are looking to continually tweak moving forward.

Kowalski said that installing cover crops can, depending on the plant species, cost as much as \$100 per acre. He noted that the district does provide tax credit of around 20 percent per acre for farmers.

He estimated that around 25 percent of the row-crop farmers that he is aware of use cover crops in some fashion.

Although the district has seen a fair amount of signup in previous years, Kowalski also noted that their numbers do not account for farmers who independently implement cover crops.

“More and more people are recognizing it advantageous, not just to conservation of their water or to their soil, but seeing it as an advantage to them,” Kowalski said.

For this season, Draper said they have planted rye again along with hairy vetch, which he said could act a “nitrogen fixer” for his garden.

Despite the higher costs of organic seed and work to install the plants, Draper indicated that he thinks cover crops make sense for the bottom line of production.

“In farming, the percentage of profit is so low, I don’t think you can do without it,” Draper said. “You should look to use cover crops to your advantage, even in conventional farming.”

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