Catch crop in maize

Problem
As a late-sown crop with a large row spacing and slow early development, maize is vulnerable to erosion. Crop cover takes place as late as mid- to end of June. Soil compaction due to the use of heavy harvest machinery can further contribute to soil erosion.

Solution
Due to its late establishment and tall growth, maize is well suited to catch cropping with pure or mixed clover (for stockless farms), or with overwintering, single-year grass-clover (for livestock-holding farms).

Outcome
- Reduction of soil erosion, given a good development.
- Suppression of seed-propagated weeds.
- Better load-carrying capacity of the soil during harvest.
- Fixation of nitrogen thanks to the legumes, and utilisation of nutrients in the soil after maize harvest.
- Grazing possible immediately after maize harvest.

Inconveniences
- Competition for water in the case of severe drought.
- Cost of seeds.

Practical recommendation
- Sow the maize at the beginning of May.
- If possible, harrow a first time before appearance of the maize plants (blind harrowing). Second harrowing should take place at a plant height of 10 cm, when the maize plants are well rooted. Between a plant size of 10 to 20 cm a first hoeing should take place.
- Apply liquid manure at 25-30 m³ per ha.
- When the maize plants reach a height of about 20 to 30 cm (from 4- to 6-leaf stage), undertake a second hoeing. Combine the second hoeing with simultaneous sowing of the catch crop into the weed-free crop.
- Recommended pure crops/crop mixtures:
  - Pure-clover crop: small-leaved white clover, hop clover, red clover (200 g/a) or sub clover (300 g/a). White clover and hop clover are less competitive than red clover or sub clover. Attention: Egyptian, Italian and Persian clover are normally too competitive.
  - Clover-mixtures are less risky: E.g. sub clover/red clover (at a mixing ratio of 5:2, a total of 300 g/a) or white clover/hop clover 1:1, a total of 200 g/a.
  - For farms with livestock, mixtures of grass and clover are an option. They can be used for grazing in autumn: E.g. white clover/smooth meadow-grass or meadow fescue or ryegrass (at a mixing ratio of 1:1, a total of about 250 g/a). Attention: ryegrass can be too competitive depending on the weather conditions.
This project has received funding from the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No. 652654. This communication only reflects the author’s view. The Research Executive Agency is not responsible for any use that may be made of the information provided.

Tips

- If possible, sow before a longer precipitation period.
- Sowing of catch crops is only successful until the maize reaches a height of around 30 cm. Late sowings are strongly suppressed by shading of the crop and cannot properly develop.
- During long drought periods, competition for water and nutrients can impair the development of the catch crop or, if the catch crop grows too lush, the development of the maize.
- In the case of the presence of root spreading weeds like docks and couch grass, a catch crop is not recommended, as this would require tillage after the maize harvest.
- The catch crop is only profitable if it remains for the duration of winter. Depending on its development and use, it could also be utilised in the following summer. If it is incorporated into the soil in spring, it has a high value as a green manure crop.

Practical testing

If this method seems to be suitable for your farm, we recommend that you test it under your own farm conditions as follows:

1. Mark part of the field as a trial plot after sowing the maize.
2. Apply the described method on the designated plot. Cultivate the remaining field as usual.

Evaluation and sharing of results

Visual evaluation: In favourable conditions, the catch crop has virtually no impact on the growth of the maize. Nevertheless, it might be interesting to compare height of the maize plants and weed density in the two trial plots at different points in time. After maize harvest, a visual evaluation of the soil structure (e.g. with a spade test) may lead to interesting findings. Photographs help documenting possible differences and serve as a basis for later analyses.

Quantitative evaluation: Using the catch crop as overwintering green manure can have positive impact on the succeeding crop’s yield.

Use the comment section on the Farmknowledge Platform to share your experiences with other farmers, advisors and scientists! If you have any questions concerning the method, please contact the author of the practice abstract by e-mail.

Further information

Links

- The Farmknowledge Tool Database offers further practical information on soil-covering techniques in general, as well as on catch crops in particular.
- Information on catch-crop technique as well as on additional soil-cover solutions can be found at bioaktuell.ch.
- Information on catch crops in general and in particular for maize at oekolandbau.de.

About this practice abstract and OK-Net Arable

Publishers: Research Institute of Organic Agriculture (FiBL), Switzerland
Ackerstrasse 113, Postfach 219, CH-5070 Frick
Tel. +41 62 865 72 72, info.suisse@fibl.org, www.fibl.org
IFOAM EU, Rue du Commerce 124, BE-1000 Brussels
Tel. +32 2 280 12 23, info@ifoam-eu.org, www.ifoam.eu.org

Authors: Hansueli Dierauer, Franziska Siegrist and Gilles Weidmann (FiBL)
Contact: hansueli.dierauer@fibl.org

Translation: Andreas Basler, Language editing: Simon Moakes
Permalink: Orgprints.org/31021

OK-Net Arable: This practice abstract was elaborated in the Organic Knowledge Network Arable project. The project is running from March 2015 to February 2018. OK-Net Arable promotes exchange of knowledge among farmers, farm advisers and scientists with the aim to increase productivity and quality in organic arable cropping all over Europe.

Project website: www.ok-net-arable.eu
Project partners: IFOAM EU Group (project coordinator), BE; Organic Research Centre, UK; Bioland Beratung GmbH, DE; Aarhus University (ICROFS), DK; Associazione Italiana, per l’Agricoltura Biologica (AIAB), IT; European Forum for Agricultural and Rural Advisory Services (EUFRAS); Centro Internazionale di Alti Studi Agronomici Mediterranei – Istituto Agronomico Mediterraneo Di Bari (IAMB), IT; FiBL Projekte GmbH, DE; FiBL Österreich, AT; FiBL Schweiz, CH; Ökológiai Mezőgazdasági Kutatóintézet (ÖMKI), HU; Con Marche Bio, IT; Estonian Organic Farming Foundation, EE; Bioforum Vlaanderen, BE; Institut Technique de l’Agriculture Biologique, FR; SEGES, DK : Bioselena, Bulgaria

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