

**NATURAL RESOURCES CONSERVATION SERVICE  
CONSERVATION PRACTICE STANDARD**

**ALLEY CROPPING**

(Ac.)

**CODE 311**

**DEFINITION**

Trees or shrubs are planted in sets of single or multiple rows with agronomic, horticultural crops or forages produced in the alleys between the sets of woody plants that produce additional products.

**PURPOSE**

- Enhance microclimatic conditions to improve crop or forage quality and quantity.
- Reduce surface water runoff and erosion.
- Improve soil health by increasing utilization and cycling of nutrients.
- Alter subsurface water quantity or water table depths.
- Enhance wildlife and beneficial insect habitat.
- Increase crop diversity.
- Decrease offsite movement of nutrients or chemicals.
- Increase carbon storage in plant biomass and soils.
- Develop renewable energy systems.
- Improve air quality.

**CONDITIONS WHERE PRACTICE APPLIES**

On all cropland and hayland where trees, shrubs, crops and/or forages can be grown in combination.

**CRITERIA**

**General Criteria Applicable to All Purposes**

**Combinations of crops or forages and woody plants will be compatible and complementary.**

Plants will be adapted to the climatic region and the soil resource.

Crop or forage sequence and woody species selection will be determined using an acceptable nutrient balance procedure. Plants selected will maximize the utilization and cycling of soil nutrients and plant residues to maintain soil organic matter content.

Moisture conservation or supplemental watering will be provided for plant establishment and growth where natural precipitation is too low for the selected species.

Select pest resistant plant varieties.

Avoid selecting tree or shrub species that provide habitat to pests of the accompanying crop or forage.

Select crop, forage, tree and/or shrub varieties based on their tolerance to agriculture chemicals that will be used at the site.

The distance between the sets of trees or shrubs will be determined by the following:

- Tree or shrub management objectives;
- Light requirements and growth period of the crops or forages in the alleys;
- Erosion control needs;
- Machinery widths and turning areas.

Soil erosion will be controlled by vegetative or other means until the alley cropping design is fully functional.

Refer to Tree/Shrub Establishment Standard (612) for further guidance on planting trees and shrubs.

**Additional Criteria to Reduce Surface Water Runoff and Erosion**

Tree or shrub rows will be oriented on or near the contour to reduce water erosion.

To reduce surface water runoff and erosion, ground cover will be established in conjunction with the tree or shrub rows.

To reduce wind erosion, tree or shrub rows will be oriented as close as possible perpendicular to erosive winds.

Selected species of trees and shrubs will be relatively deep rooted to encourage infiltration.

**Additional Criteria to Increase Carbon Storage**

Select tree and shrub species with rapid growth rates.

Plant and manage for the density that will maximize above and below ground biomass as appropriate for the site.

Minimize soil disturbance through use of no-till methods.

**Additional Criteria to Develop Renewable Energy Systems**

Select plants that can provide adequate kinds and amounts of plant biomass to supply identified bioenergy needs.

Intensity and frequency of energy biomass removals will be managed to prevent long-term negative impacts on the system.

The harvesting of energy biomass will be accomplished in a manner that will not compromise the other intended purpose(s) and functions.

**Additional Criteria to Improve Air Quality**

Residue from the alley-crop will be left on the surface.

Select and maintain tree/shrub species with foliar and structural characteristics that optimize interception, absorption and adsorption of particulates.

Tree or shrub rows will be oriented as close to perpendicular as possible to prevailing wind direction during the critical air period. Refer to [Windbreak/Shelterbelt Establishment \(380\)](#) Standard and Specifications for more information on using trees/shrubs to improve air quality at a particular site.

**CONSIDERATIONS**

Consider using native species, which are adapted to the New Mexico climate and soils.

Species diversity, including use of native species, should be considered to avoid loss of function due to species-specific pests or to enhance wildlife habitats.

No plants on the Federal or state noxious weeds list will be planted. (For example, species such as Russian olive and Siberian elm must not be used). For more information, see the [NRCS noxious and invasive plants page](#).

If trees or shrubs will be harvested or provide products, high value trees or shrubs should be selected to maximize economic returns.

Select crops, forages and woody plants for water requirements not to exceed available soil water or that require low levels of supplemental water.

Select crops, forages and woody plants with compatible rooting depths to better utilize available soil moisture.

Consider modifying microclimatic conditions and habitat to enhance biological pest management.

**PLANS AND SPECIFICATIONS**

Plans and Specifications for applying this practice will be prepared for each site and recorded using approved specification sheets, job sheets, technical notes and narrative statements in the conservation plan or other acceptable documentation.

**OPERATION AND MAINTENANCE**

The trees, shrubs, crops and/or forages will be inspected periodically and protected from adverse impacts including insects, diseases or competing vegetation. The trees or shrubs will also be protected from fire and damage from livestock or wildlife.

All other specified maintenance measures and techniques of tree/shrub establishment will continue as needed. This includes supplemental water as needed, replacement of dead and dying trees or shrubs, pruning of dead or damaged branches for safety reasons, periodic pruning of selected branches for control of product quality, and control of undesirable competing vegetation.

Any removals of tree or shrub products, use of agricultural chemicals, and maintenance operations will be consistent with the intended purpose of the practice. Avoid damaging the site and soil and

comply with applicable federal, state and local regulations pertaining to on-site and off-site effects.

#### **REFERENCES**

More information on alley cropping can be found at:  
<http://nac.unl.edu/alleycropping.htm>