

The Answer Lies in the Soil

Walter Gabriel* knew this, and we gardeners know this. Soil, along with sun and rain, sustain most terrestrial life. We gardeners also know how tricky it is to work with all three.

Soil is the element on which we have the most direct influence. Looking after it properly helps productivity and biodiversity, and may potentially contribute to mitigating climate change. So how best can we look after it?

Building and maintaining soil health

- Feed the soil, not the plant. Add home-made compost and other bulky organic materials, eg. soil improver, leaf mould, comfrey and nettle leaves, wood chip, well rotted manure (from organic sources if possible, and not too much). These can all be laid on as a mulch to be naturally incorporated into the soil; no need to dig them in! Leaving leftovers from harvested crops on the bed is another way and provides habitat for beasties over the winter.
- Minimise digging. This avoids disrupting the soil ecosystem, and goes hand in hand with lots of mulching. Also makes for less work! Local digging to remove invasive perennial weeds, and hoeing off or hand pulling annual weeds is a good compromise.
- Keep soil covered – with crops (intercropping or sowing catch crops increases cover), green manures, or mulch, even cardboard if you're short of mulch. Green manures can benefit soil fertility and structure. Bare soil is unnatural – it's more vulnerable to erosion and nutrients being washed away, and weeds will make it their home. And if there's something growing, there's more habitat for wildlife.
- Rotate crops. This helps maintain good soil structure and efficient use of nutrients, and reduces pests and diseases.

For more information, go to www.gardenorganic.org.uk

*For younger members, Walter Gabriel was a character in The Archers from 1953 to 1988, and a fount of rural wisdom. One of his catch phrases was 'I think the answer lies in the soil.'