

With all the talk these days about local food, it is easy to forget that the most local of all foods are those that we grow for ourselves in our home gardens.

People produce their own food for all sorts of reasons – to save money, to ensure that what they eat is safe and fresh, or for the sheer pleasure of seeing their garden grow. Whatever it is that makes you a home gardener, one thing is certain. If you want to grow good food, you need to look after your garden soil.

So what is the ideal soil? The experts tell us that it is 45% “dirt” – a combination of clay, silt and sand; 25% air; 25% water; and 5% “organic matter”. What any gardener will tell you is that most soils aren’t that ideal! The good news is that with a few simple practices almost any garden soil can be improved.

The key to it all is in that 5% of “organic matter”. Whether you have an existing garden plot or you are breaking in some ground for the first time, the regular addition of organic matter will help transform even the most unpromising veggie patch.

By feeding the soil with organic matter, you provide food and shelter for the billions – yes, billions! – of minute organisms that help your plants grow. You also create the air spaces for roots to move into and increase the soil’s ability to hold water.

And how do you do this?

- Make compost. Grass clippings, leaves, weeds (avoid seeds, of course); vegetable scraps can all be converted into a rich soil amendment.
- Mulch. Cover garden beds with organic matter to hold in moisture and protect the soil.
- Grow cover crops (aka green manures). After harvest, or between crops, grow a mixture of lupins, beans – for nitrogen – phacelia, buckwheat, oats – for carbon.

There’s much more to learn, of course. Talk to your neighbours, join a garden club (you can find the Dunedin Vegetable Growers Club here <http://dvgc.co.nz>), ask questions at your local garden store, or visit the library - the team at the Dunedin Public Libraries have developed a handy booklet called 'Green Food Ideas', that shows what gardening and food-related books are available, and makes it easy to find them. Pop in and get a hard copy from the city library, or email us at info@goodfooddunedin.com and we will email you a copy.

Soil is perhaps our most precious resource: let’s all do our bit to use it with care.

Good Food Dunedin is a Dunedin City Council-led initiative, supported by individuals, communities, organisations and businesses who share a vision to transform Dunedin into a thriving, resilient, and food-secure city.