OIL covers the earth like a skin. Along with water and air, it is one of our essential natural resources.

Without it, we would starve: more than 95 per cent of our food comes from the soil. But soil is more than a place to grow food. Healthy soils also help provide clean drinking water, eliminate chemicals, manage flooding and hold twice as much carbon than all the world’s forests and sunlit ocean area combined.

Soil also supports an array of soil life including earthworms and ants and creatures seen only with a microscope such as nematodes and bacteria.

A spoonful of healthy soil can contain more living organisms than there are people on the planet.

The more fertile the soil is, the more organisms it has living in it. However, because of the intensification of agriculture, humans have tended to squash this natural treasure of ‘brown gold’.

Soil in the UK is currently being destroyed 10 times faster than it is being created – and it can take up to 500 years to create just one inch of fertile topsoil.

Although used with the best intention of producing more food for less, agricultural chemicals have turned out to be detrimental to natural systems. Chemicals designed to exterminate farm pests have also killed the very creatures needed to make the soil fertile.

However, using factory-made fertiliser is like feeding junk food to the soil – the plants get a quick fix, but it does not help the soil recover.

“The UK loses the equivalent of one football field of soil every five seconds – the weight of 240,000 double decker buses per year,” says Ursula Billington of Bristol-based Sustainable Soils Alliance.

It was in response to the UK’s plight that the SSA was born.

“Soil is the beating heart of life on earth, a vital element that supports the health of people, plants, wildlife, water and air,”

She highlights how our urban nature reserve, Feed Bristol, is an exciting example of people working in harmony with land and nature, rooted in respect for the soil.

Feed Bristol is sited on the Blue Finger – an area of Grade 1 agricultural land with top quality soil which used to host the market gardens supplying Bristol with fresh produce.

Looking after soil nurtures wildlife. Our Feed Bristol project manager Matt Cracknell says: “More soil life means a cascading effect on above-ground biodiversity – insects, mammals and birds.

“As a conservation charity, we champion good soil management because it supports our whole ecosystem as well as addressing one of the biggest threats to biodiversity – climate change.”

On its nature reserves, the Wildlife Trusts look after 100,000 hectares of wildlife-rich sensitively managed soils.

We also lobby for measures to help soil recovery – all of which can be used by gardeners to create healthy soil in their back yard.

Firstly, avoid bare soil. As soon as a plant or shrub is growing, it is extracting carbon dioxide out of the atmosphere where too much CO2 is contributing to climate change.

Seco ndly, nurture your compost heap where the decaying organic material (anything that once lived, be it leaves, vegetable peelings, newspaper or coffee grounds) breaks down into crumbly nutrient-rich soil.

Thirdly, grow fast-growing plants such as mustard and alfalfa to cover bare ground, and – while they are still green – dig them into the soil as ‘green manure’.

The good news is that society is starting to wake up to the value of soil. In its 25-Year Environment Plan considering law-making post-Brexit, the government commits to improving soil health and restoring peatlands, setting a goal of sustainably managed soils in England by 2030.

In turn, the Environment Agency produced a report on soil in June welcoming a new system of ‘public money for public goods’ to reward farmers for protecting and regenerating soil.

Along with the Sustainable Soils Alliance and other nature-friendly organisations, the Wildlife Trusts are lobbying for Environment and Agricultural Bills with greater powers of enforcement and regulation to ensure sustainable soil management. It is time to notice the world under our feet and give it the credit it is due.

Go to www.sustainablesoils.org to find out more about their work.