**Adam’s Gardening Tips for February Soil Management**

When taking over a new garden or allotment testing the acidity level of the soil is a good place to start. Kits are available from garden centres. Most crops are happy in the pH range of 6.5 – 7. If the soil is on the acid side (lower than 6.5) it is relatively easy to raise the alkalinity by adding lime in some form, or using spent mushroom compost which contains some lime. Take care not to overdo this however, as some nutrients can be locked up in a very alkaline soil. It is not quite so easy to make a soil more acid as this involves adding sulphur or iron sulphate and grass clippings and /or leaf mould over several seasons.

Drainage is very important particularly on heavier soils containing a lot of clay particles. If the layer beneath the topsoil is compacted this will also contribute to poor drainage which can be overcome by double digging (breaking up the subsoil to allow moisture to drain away and roots to penetrate). In bad conditions trenches (approx. 15 inches below the digging level) crossing the site containing gravel or rubble can help. Whether your soil is light and sandy or heavier clay one of the most beneficial things to improve the soil is plenty of organic matter (humus). This will open up the and help bind together the sand will then retain moisture and plant nutrients.

Some people such as Adam, like the idea of a no dig system. The key to this is starting off with well broken up subsoil and whenever there is movement over the ground using boards to spread the gardener’s weight thus avoiding compaction. This method encourages a good population of earthworms which helps soil structure enormously. Organic matter can be applied to the surface and will be incorporated by said worms.

April finds it is useful to grow green manures, planted in very early autumn which can be dug in to improve the humus content and if leguminous will add nitrogen to the soil. A little bit of poultry manure sprinkled on the area before digging in can aid decomposition. This can also be useful for suppressing winter weed growth. There are a range of different plants which can be used for this. Study the back of the seed packets to find which is best for your situation.

Most vegetable seeds need a temperature of 7o centigrade to germinate which can be difficult to achieve in early spring on heavier moisture retentive soils. If cloches or black plastic sheeting are laid over the soil for about 4 weeks in late winter it will make a difference of several degrees, considerably bringing forward the sowing time.