

FOR PEAT'S SAKE

USING PEAT-FREE BAGGED COMPOST

Sometimes it's not possible to access soil or homemade compost so you will need to buy your growing mix. But you can still go peat free. Until recently, peat-free mixes were not entirely successful but they now perform as well, if not better, than those with peat.

If you've traditionally grown in a peat-based compost, you may need to get used to a peat-free mix. Don't be afraid to experiment to find what suits you and your plants best.

WATERING

Because of their high coir and woodchip content, peat-free mixes can dry out more easily.

They also have a coarse texture, which can appear dry on the surface but still damp further down.

Before watering, check by putting your finger in the soil to see if it's dry all the way through. Watering little and often is best.

Don't let them dry out otherwise they can be difficult to water again, as the water runs off the top. If this does happen, soak the whole pot in a bucket of water to let it draw up the moisture.

FEEDING

All bagged composts have CRFs (controlled release fertilisers) included which feed the plant over a period of a few weeks.

Peat-based composts claim to feed for up to 6 weeks, while most peat-free composts provide fertiliser up to 4 weeks.

If you observe your plants on a regular basis you will know if they need extra feeding. Use liquid feeds, such as homemade comfrey tea.

With more mature plants which are potted up, we recommend adding homemade compost into the mix. It helps with structure, and provides slow release nutrients over a period of months.

WHAT'S IN A BAG?

All potting composts are made out of a mixture of substances. In taking peat out of the mix, there is a rebalancing of ingredients. The following are the most common:

- Composted wood products such as bark, sawdust or paper mill waste make up the bulk of many peat free potting composts. These have good water-holding properties but the consistency and composition can be variable depending on where it is sourced from. Ideally the mix shouldn't contain more than 25% soft wood.
- Green waste compost collected from local councils can make up to one third of the mix. PAS100 certification aims to ensure that it is a consistent standard. Green waste compost is also commonly sold on its own as 'soil improver'. But, like homemade compost, it is too rich to be used on its own as a potting mix or to fill raised beds.
- Coir is also commonly found in peat free composts, and provides a good mix of water holding and aeration. Its texture is good for seed sowing, but on its own it contains virtually no nutrients, and doesn't hold onto added nutrients - unlike peat. Coir is the waste of a coconut husk; horticultural coir uses the secondary waste from coir which has been used to make ropes and matting. Although it puts to good use a waste product, the shipping distance is a cause for concern.
- Wool is sometimes used as it has good aeration and acts as a slow release nitrogen fertilizer.
- Composted bracken has good water-holding properties and is slightly acidic, so is ideal for ericaceous plants.

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**"DID YOU KNOW
THAT NEARLY
30% OF THE
EARTH'S SOIL
CARBON IS
STORED IN PEAT
BOGS?"**

