SPECIALIST COMPOSTS

Some plants have more specific compost needs.

AQUATIC COMPOST: consists of sterilised loam and grit to anchor pond plants in the water with a controlled-release fertiliser that feeds the plants but prevents the nutrients from leaching into the water and causing algal growth.

ORCHIDS: need a free-draining specialist Orchid Compost with added bark chips.

CACTI: do best in an extra-gritty, sharply-draining Cacti Compost mix.

ERICACEOUS COMPOST: Acid-loving plants such as blueberries, rhododendrons, azaleas, heathers and camellias need ericaceous compost, which tends to be a peat-based mix with less added lime and different fertilisers from multipurpose compost. Manufacturers are working to produce peat-reduced and peat-free ericaceous composts suitable for acid-loving plants.

If potted into a general multi-purpose compost, the leaves on ericaceous plants can turn yellow, blotches might appear or the leaf edges can turn brown because there is too much chalk in the potting mixture. Larger ericaceous trees and shrubs are often easier to manage in John Innes ericaceous compost.

THE GROWING MEDIA INITIATIVE

The Growing Media Initiative is a scheme developed by the Horticultural Trades Association in conjunction with the Growing Media Association, DIY and Garden Centre retailers, Defra, Royal Horticultural Society and the RSPB. The GMI has been developed to help the UK's suppliers, growers and retailers in the horticultural industry meet the government targets for reduction in peat use. The scheme also aims to increase consumer awareness about the need to protect the world's peatlands (pictured below) and encourage growing media manufacturers to develop and market effective peat replacements. For more information, visit: www.growingmediainitiative.org.uk.

WHAT YOU'LL NEED

- Hanging baskets/pots
- Multipurpose compost
- Loam-based compost

Optional additives

- Perlite
- Vermiculite
- Horticultural grit
- Bark chips
- Specialist composts

For more information:
www.rhs.org.uk/advice
www.growingmedia initiative.co.uk
www.plantforlife.info
www.johninnes.info

HORTICULTURAL TRADES ASSOCIATION

THE HORTICULTURAL TRADES ASSOCIATION IS RUN BY THE GARDEN INDUSTRY FOR THE GARDEN INDUSTRY

It is dedicated to providing services, products, advice and information to help support and promote the business activities of garden retailers, growers, landscapers, wholesalers, manufacturers and service providers in the UK.

- HTA Specialist Group – Growing Media Association visit **www.growingmedia.co.uk**
- Tel: **0118 930 3132** or visit **www.the-hta.org.uk**
- Plant*for*Life – visit **www.plantforlife.info**

ROYAL HORTICULTURAL SOCIETY

THE ROYAL HORTICULTURAL SOCIETY IS THE UK'S LEADING GARDENING CHARITY

Membership benefits include:

- free entry with a guest to RHS Gardens Wisley, Rosemoor, Hyde Hall and Harlow Carr;
- free entry to more than 140 recommended gardens; privileged entry and reduced-rate tickets for RHS flower shows;
- free gardening advice service;
- and free monthly edition of *The Garden* magazine.
- Call **0845 130 4646** or visit **www.rhs.org.uk**

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THE EASY GUIDE TO

CHOOSING COMPOST

INTRODUCTION

Different potting composts are available to help you grow a range of plants that wouldn't suit your garden soil. They provide ideal nutritional balances for particular plants and growing purposes.

Plants in hanging baskets and pots need a suitable potting compost that's specially formulated to address their growing needs, gives a steady supply of nutrients, promotes healthy root growth, provides anchorage for the plant and has a good structure – open enough to allow air to the roots and surplus water to drain, yet sufficiently binding to keep enough water in.

PEAT-REDUCED AND PEAT-FREE PRODUCTS

For decades, peat-based potting composts have been used to raise and grow-on plants. However, peat is primarily sourced from lowland raised bogs – an increasingly rare habitat in the UK and Europe – and in recent years, the need to conserve this diminishing natural resource, as well as the flora and fauna that depend on it, has been recognised.

Compost manufacturers have responded by producing an increasing range of peat-free and peat-reduced growing media containing mixtures of organic materials such as composted bark, woodfibre (pictured below), coir (coconut fibre) and green compost – mixed with inorganic materials including grit, sharp sand, rock wool and perlite. A mix of coarse and fine particles is needed to create a balanced compost containing enough water and air, which are essential for root growth.

Although completely peat-free growing media are the best choice for the environment, many brands are also offering 'reduced-peat' alternatives, which contain up to 50 percent non-peat materials blended into the compost. Manufacturers are continuously working to improve the quality of the blends. If you're keen to help the environment in this way, choose a peat-reduced or peat-free compost with full information on the packaging. Read and follow the instructions about the suitability of the mix for particular purposes.

Peat-reduced and peat-free brands often recommend specific fertilisers to use with their compost: this is not a marketing ploy, as different formulations contain varying balances of nutrients. Use either the recommended product or one with a similar nutrient balance – look out for details of the NPK (Nitrogen, Phosphorus and Potassium) ratio and the trace-element content on the packaging.

CHOOSING POTTING COMPOSTS

Today there is a huge choice of different media on the market, varying in price, purpose (specialist uses), quality and, increasingly, green credentials. Whether you're sowing seeds, planting hanging baskets or potting up shrubs, make sure you choose the right type of compost for the job in hand. Although multipurpose compost may seem like the obvious choice, check whether a specialist compost (see back panel), any growing media additives (see right) or a loam-based compost (see below) would help provide your plants with the best chance of success.

MULTIPURPOSE/SOILLESS COMPOSTS

Since the 1960s, multi-purpose compost has been the most widely used potting compost. Cheap, free from pathogens, holding water and nutrients well, and performing consistently, it is ideal for bedding plants and raising young potted plants. The mix does not contain soil or loam but consists of peat or peat substitutes (such as composted organic waste or wood fibre) mixed with sand, perlite, bark chip or vermiculite for added drainage and aeration, and gardeners can supply their own additives for specific plants or growing conditions. You may find composted municipal green waste on offer as a cheaper alternative potting compost. However, this is variable in performance and best used for single-season bedding or as a soil improver.

LOAM-BASED COMPOSTS

Loam is a mixture of sand, clay and silt (the soil's three main mineral constituents). A good loam is ideal for incorporating into a loam-based compost such as John Innes, the most-easily managed medium for permanently containerised trees, shrubs and perennials.

John Innes composts are made from sterilised loam, peat and grit with added lime and fertilisers to standardised recipes developed by the John Innes institute in the 1930s. They are more expensive and heavier than multi-purpose composts, providing good plant anchorage.

John Innes no. 1 contains the least fertiliser (for short-term pot plants); no. 2 has more nutrients (for permanent pot plants with low fertiliser needs); no. 3 has the most fertiliser (for a wide range of permanent container plants). John Innes ericaceous compost is formulated for lime-hating trees, shrubs and perennials (see panel on back).

Look out for the John Innes Manufacturers Association Seal of Approval.

GROWING MEDIA ADDITIVES

Various materials can be added to potting composts to improve the mixture, making them more suitable for growing certain plants.

PERLITE TO IMPROVE DRAINAGE: Perlite is a man-made product produced by crushing and heating volcanic glass to 1,000°c, which then expands into a lightweight shell, filled with air. It's ideal for opening up the compost and improving drainage, especially for winter bedding schemes in containers, which can suffer waterlogging in heavy rainfall. Use a mix of 70 percent soilless compost and 30 percent perlite.

VERMICULITE FOR SOWING: Also man-made, vermiculite is produced by heating a type of clay to 1,000°c for one minute, causing the mineral to expand into an open lattice structure with a dry, spongy feel. Vermiculite is sterile, contains plant nutrients, and improves both the drainage and water-holding capacity of composts. When sowing seeds, use any seed-sowing compost and cover with a thin layer of fine vermiculite, which will help create a humid, warm and aerated environment, ideal for germination.

HORTICULTURAL GRIT FOR BETTER DRAINAGE: A natural material derived from rock (ideally 5mm) horticultural grit opens up the compost, creating spaces to allow good drainage, adds weight to compost (useful for top-heavy plants) and improves plant anchorage. As many popular shrubs, perennials and bulbs come from dry, Mediterranean areas with stony, well-drained soils, the plants will perform better if you mimic these soil conditions. Mix three parts grit with seven parts multipurpose compost. Bulbs will benefit from a 2.5cm layer of grit placed at the base of the planting hole to aid drainage further.

BARK CHIPS FOR WOODLAND PLANTS: Woodland perennials such as hellebores, bergenias, ferns and heucheras enjoy soils that are moist but well drained and rich in organic matter. When growing them in containers, use a multipurpose compost with added bark chips. These will improve overall drainage while allowing the compost to remain moist and cool, sustaining plant growth.