

Buyer's Guide / Seed composts

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Give your seeds the best start

It's seed sowing time and Geoff Hodge looks at some of the special composts on the market

SPRING is just around the corner and seed sowing is high on the agenda. It's definitely well worth buying a good seed compost, since seeds and young seedlings have specific needs. Both are vulnerable to rots and drying out, so unless you get it right you could end up with no plants at all or sickly ones not worth planting out.

Seed composts are formulated to have a fine texture, so the seeds are in close contact with the compost, and to hold plenty of moisture, but with

good drainage to prevent waterlogging. Typically they contain peat - or a peat substitute such as coir fibre, composted bark or green waste - to hold moisture, sand for drainage and, sometimes in John Innes composts, sterilised loam or soil.

These composts also have low nutrient levels, since seeds don't need any external nutrients to germinate and young seedlings need just a little to keep them growing well. High levels of nutrients can be harmful to newly-germinated plants and can

burn the seedlings' sensitive roots, setting them back or killing them completely.

What about seeds of lime-hating, ericaceous plants? Apart from ericaceous types, composts have lime added to neutralise the acidity of the main ingredients. Most ericaceous seeds should grow in a general seed compost but if you're having problems, mix equal parts of seed sowing and ericaceous composts.

Always buy fresh compost each year. Old compost can become stale, which can affect seeds and seedlings.



Multi-purpose composts

Are seed sowing composts really necessary? Can't we just use multi-purpose compost instead?

Multi-purpose composts are just that - they're formulated for a host of different jobs. They give satisfactory results when you want one compost in which to sow seeds, take cuttings and pot up plants in containers. But, for the best results, it's always a good idea to use a 'fit for purpose' compost that has been tailor-made for the job.

Suppliers

• B&Q, 0845 609 6688, www.diy.com
 • Scotts Miracle-Gro (Levington and Miracle-Gro), 0845 190 1881, www.lovethegarden.com
 • Vital Earth, 01335 300355, www.vitalearth.tv
 • Westland Horticulture, www.gardenhealth.com
 • William Sinclair (J Arthur Bower's and New Horizon), 01522 537561, www.william-sinclair.co.uk

Prices

Prices for compost can vary greatly, depending on where you buy it. Many garden centres and DIY stores offer discounts, especially on bulk buys, so it's always worth shopping around.

B&Q Sowing & Cutting Compost

£2.98

This is specially formulated to provide the ideal texture and nutritional characteristics needed for sowing seeds and rooting cuttings. It is made from a blend of top quality moss peat and sustainable organic materials plus nutrients.
Size 12 litres



J Arthur Bower's Seed & Cutting

£2.89 - £5.99

This is a reduced-peat compost with sand in the mix to help plant roots establish. It contains peat, bark and composted green waste, plus nutrients - including trace elements - and a wetting agent.
Sizes 10 litres, 20 litres, 25 litres, 35 litres and 60 litres



Levington Seed & Cutting Compost

£4.49

A fine compost that creates an optimum seed-bed for sensitive seeds. It contains loam, peat and sand but is also formulated to have a high-phosphate content for optimum root growth of seeds and cuttings.
Size 20 litres.



Miracle-Gro Seed & Cutting Compost

£3.49

A mix of 90 per cent peat and 10 per cent coir to provide optimum root growth. This compost is also enriched with organic plant food to feed seedlings for up to six weeks after they have germinated.
Size 8 litres



New Horizon Coir Compost

£5.99

A peat-free general-purpose compost made from the coir fibre element of coconut husks with added nutrients and trace elements. Suitable for seed sowing and taking cuttings, but don't use it for lime-hating plants.
Size 50 litres



New Horizon Multi-Purpose Compost

£3.29 - £5.99

This is a general peat-free, multi-purpose compost made from composted bark, timber residues and green waste with added slow-release organic nutrients. Suitable for seed sowing and cuttings.
Sizes 10 litres, 35 litres, 50 litres and 60 litres



Vital Earth Seed & Cutting Compost

£2.85

This is a peat-free compost made from green compost, composted bark and clean clay particles with added natural slow-release nutrients. It has a fine texture and good water-retention to help produce strong roots. Vital earth also produces a peat-free John Innes compost.
Sizes 60 litres, 100 litres



Westland Surestart Seed & Cutting

£3.49

This compost has a fine grade and reduced peat content. The Surestart formulation with natural plant extract improves germination by 25 per cent. It has improved aeration and drainage as well as a unique formulation to release nutrients when needed.
Sizes 10 litres, 30 litres

