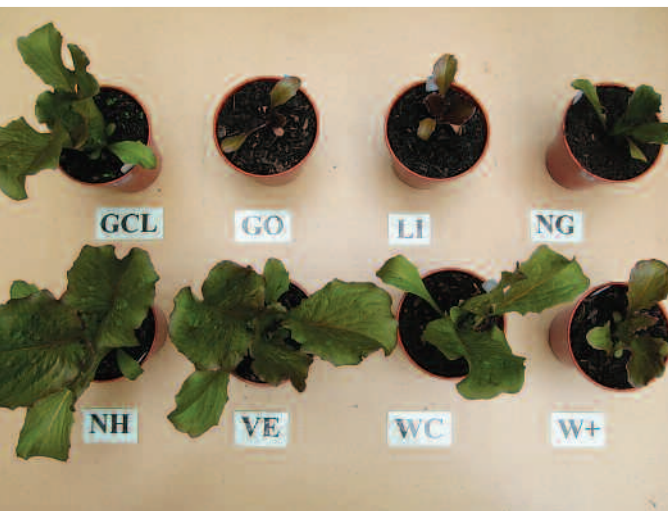
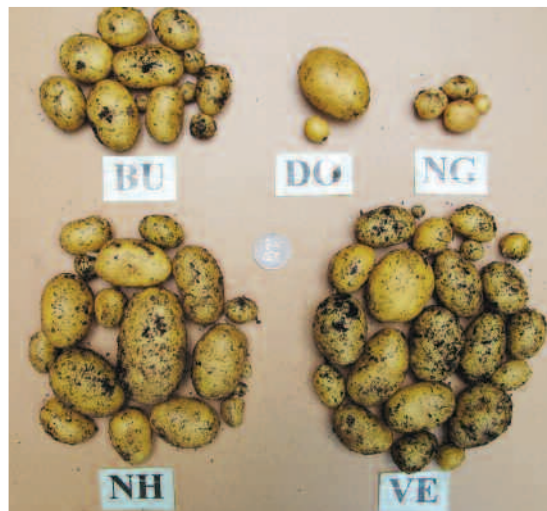


# Choosing and using peat-free compost

Are you looking for a dependable peat-free compost that gives consistently good results? John Walker reflects on some lessons learned from his ongoing trials with 16 different peat-free composts, and recommends his “reliable five” to try out this spring.



‘Red Iceberg’ lettuce growing well in four of my “reliable five”: GCL, NH, VE and WC. One of the worst performers was LI. Costing just 5p/litre, it consistently produced small, starved plants



Grown in pots for ultra-early crops, ‘Lady Christl’ showed wide variations in the final yield of new potatoes. NH and VE were “neck and neck” for most productive peat-free



Although easy to remove, I could deter weed seedlings in my 50:50 garden compost/leaf mould mix by covering the top 1 cm with a purchased peat-free

*Peat-free compost is rubbish:* give me a penny for every time I’ve heard this and I’d be rich. Motivated to uncover whether such a sweeping generalisation has any substance, last spring, armed with a bag of almost every brand of peat-free “multipurpose” compost available, I invested some of those imagined pennies to find out. Many months of hands-on growing and observation later, I can report that the “rubbish” message is a convenient myth that belongs in the compost bin.

## Peat-free on trial

My garden scale trial of peat-free composts or growing media has a simple aim: to identify those that will successfully grow a range of different plants and that I am happy to recommend. With the urgency of ending

peat use my priority, I included both organic and non-organic brands in my trials. Almost all were bought locally, the less widely available ones, by mail order and one was home-made. This article draws on my experiences with the first 16 peat-free composts included in my trial, which I used to grow lettuces, early potatoes, sweetcorn, radishes and tomatoes.

My rules are simple: I sow/grow in clean 9cm diameter pots, water as needed with tap water to avoid introducing diseases, primarily damping off, and give no additional feeding, which makes plants totally reliant on the nutrients available in the compost. All growing is in an unheated greenhouse and/or outdoors. My aim is to produce good, strong plants suitable for growing on. The exception is early

potatoes, which were grown in 20cm diameter pots.

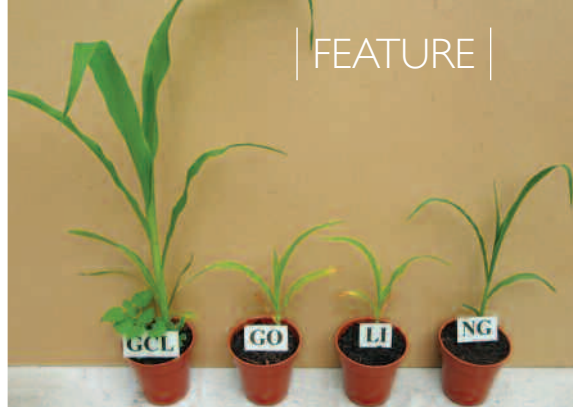
Comparing numerous bags of earth-friendly composts side by side, handling and then using them is hugely informative. Here are some lessons learnt.

## Coarse and hungry

I don’t believe the myth that peat-frees are not good for seed sowing because they’re too coarse and need riddling; I easily sowed smaller seeds like lettuce direct into each pot. One characteristic that peat-frees made from coarse wood fibre (BU, DO, EM, W+) share is that they invariably suffer from a lack of nutrients, which causes stunted growth unless given additional feeding.

## Coir conundrum

Overall, FFM and FFS gave poor results



**My home-made compost (GCL) gave consistently strong and healthy plants that put poor-performing peat-frees to shame. I left the weed seedlings to show they had no adverse effect on sweetcorn FI 'Prelude'**

**Despite germination failures with both FFM and FFS, these coir composts encouraged exceptionally strong root growth in transplanted tomato 'Red Cherry'. High wood-fibre DO and EM produced weak, starved plants**

when used for seed germination, but when used for growing on pricked-out seedlings, they both produced respectable plants with extensive root systems. Any seedlings that did emerge in coir compost showed damping-off-like symptoms. It's too soon to comment on the new coir plus "biochar" (fine-ground charcoal) composts, but early results are promising.

### Flexible thinking

If you're wary of using home-made compost for sowing, use a reliable peat-free instead, then prick out into home-made. If worried you won't be able to tell sown plants from weed seedlings, cover home-made compost with 1-2cm of bought-in compost and sow into that.

### Fungal friends

A common peat-free myth is that small mushrooms, which occasionally appear in some peat-frees, are harmful. These fungi are simply feeding on some of the ingredients in the compost. I've found that plants grow healthily – if not stronger sometimes – in pots where they appear.

### My "reliable five"

Costs are based on the price of a single bag of compost excluding delivery.

#### GCL – no cost: "top of the pots"

This is ultra-local compost from my "cool" compost bin and three-year-old leaf mould, both passed through a 5mm

riddle and mixed thoroughly. It has no processing, packaging or transport and a zero "footprint". It grew plants as good as any purchased peat-frees.

#### WC (30l bag) – £0.43p/litre

Although expensive, this sustainable mix of composted bracken and sheep's wool is a delight to handle and fine enough for even small seeds. It's a worthwhile investment to give seeds a flying start before growing on in a more economical peat-free/home-made mix.

#### NH (50l bag) – £0.12p/litre

A reliable, widely available and good value all-rounder that's pleasant to handle with a fine, sowing-friendly texture. There are odd "alien" fragments and it produces occasional but harmless mini mushrooms. Excellent bag-to-bag consistency.

#### VE (60l bag) – £0.10p/litre

Made from composted green waste, this is a good to handle all-rounder that shows exceptional staying power in terms of the nutrients it contains. It produced very strong root growth with all plants.

#### FFM (35l bag) – £0.37p/litre

Despite poor results with sowing and although relatively expensive, this and FFS are clean and pleasant to handle. From transplanted seedlings, they produced generally strong plants with exceptionally fibrous root systems.

### Key to the 16 peat-free composts included in the trial

**R** available retail; **MO** mail order

- BQ** B&Q Peat-free Multipurpose
- BU** Bulrush Professional Peat-free Multi-Purpose
- CGA** Carbon Gold Biochar All Purpose
- CGS** Carbon Gold Biochar Seed
- DO** Dobbies Select Organic & Peat-Free Multi-purpose
- EM** Earth Matters Nature Works Peat-Free Multipurpose
- FFM** Fertile Fibre Multipurpose (**MO** fertilefibre.com)
- FFS** Fertile Fibre Seed (**MO** fertilefibre.com)
- GCL** 50:50 garden compost + leaf mould
- GO** Godwins Eco Supreme
- LI** Aldi Gardenline
- NG** Natural Gardener Waste Paper, Wormcast and Coir
- NH** New Horizon Organic and Peat-free Multipurpose (**R** william-sinclair.co.uk)
- VE** Vital Earth Multi Purpose (**R** thegreenergardener.com)
- WC** Wool Compost (**R** limited; **MO** The Organic Gardening Catalogue or dalefootcomposts.co.uk)
- W+** West Plus Peat-free Multipurpose

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Garden Organic member John Walker is an award-winning enviro-gardening writer. His latest book *How to create an eco garden: the practical guide to greener, planet-friendly gardening* was recently published by Aquamarine (ISBN-13: 978 903141 89 2). John's website is earthfriendlygardener.net.



**For the latest results from my trial visit [organicinthegarden.com/forum/index.php?topic=69.0](http://organicinthegarden.com/forum/index.php?topic=69.0)**