

# Peat-free compost: A buyer's guide

Having tested more peat-free composts than you can shake a beanpole at, **John Walker** recommends his top six peat-frees for sowing and growing this season.



Pictures: John Walker, www.earthfriendlygardener.net

My unheated greenhouse is a peat-free zone. Everything here (late summer 2011) was grown in peat-free compost, some of it home-made. Positive proof that choosing reliable and consistent peat-frees can produce impressive results in your kitchen garden.

**M**y forays in search of peat-free compost can be measured in anything from mere footsteps to many miles. It's footsteps if I'm taking compost from my plastic 'Dalek' bins to mix with my three-year-old leafmould, while one regular car journey takes in six 'peat-free stops', including both independent and 'chain' garden centres, a nursery and a national DIY store. Here I can take the pulse of what's happening with the peat-free seed/cutting, potting and multi-purpose composts on offer; it's what sad gardening writers do when the rest of the nation's busy on its plot.

Connecting with peat-free plotters via Twitter (@earthfgardener) gives an insight into the often hit-and-miss job of locating peat-free compost: feedback suggests the experience ranges from exemplary to dismal. You can order peat-free online, but for me, stocking up on compost is like gathering the ingredients for a banquet: I like to feel, touch and sniff what I'm getting. I did say I was sad.

## The curse of choice

Last month in *KG* (May 2012), I gave tips for getting the best from peat-free compost, based on road-testing 16 different mixes available to gardeners. Since spring 2011, when my trials

began, the number of composts I've tried out has grown to over 25. This bloated choice is undoubtedly a key reason (along with a slow drip of media misinformation) why peat-free has failed to make a big impression on many gardeners. 'Peat-free' on a bag, as I've found, is no guarantee of success – it just means that there's no peat inside it.

One of my trial goals was to discover which peat-frees are capable of growing good, healthy plants which any kitchen gardener would be very satisfied with. It's an indictment of compost makers that out of all the composts I've tested, barely a handful deliver consistent, reliable results from bag to bag. Poor performers simply feed the pernicious myth that 'all peat-free is rubbish'.

## Push and be choosy

Retailers only stay in business if they stock what we want, so don't be afraid to flex your I-want-peat-free muscle. Tell them which compost you're after, and ask them to contact you when it's in. Some of my recommended peat-frees (page 70) are only readily available by mail order, but clubbing together can bring costs down.

Sellers who keep their compost under cover get my money. Those who keep it outdoors, in all weathers, don't.

## BUYING AND STORING

- Choose fresh-looking bags that aren't heavy and sodden, and look out for multi-buy deals. Pass over torn, faded and 'reduced' bags.
- Pick the right product: peat-free soil improvers/conditioners are intended for working into garden soil, not for sowing/potting.
- Halved/quartered wooden pallets are ideal for keeping bags off the ground. Keep compost well away from fertilisers, insecticides and weedkillers – even a whiff of the latter can damage plants.
- The back of a compost bag often carries useful advice, such as how many pots/trays you can expect the contents to fill, compost handling tips, when to start liquid feeding (usually 4-6 weeks after potting), and so on. Read it!
- Only open bags when you're ready, then turn the tops down afterwards, keeping them shut with a clothes peg.



Most compost manufacturers include a clear declaration of how much peat is in their products. This one is 100% peat-free.

## When is 'organic' not organic?

Many compost bags boast 'organic' ingredients, but this doesn't mean that they're either peat-free and/or accredited to organic standards. Those that are approved usually carry the Soil Association organic logo, but otherwise 'organic' simply means they're made from materials of organic origin (including peat).

'Reduced peat' composts, where composted green waste/other materials are used to lower the peat percentage in the compost, are now common. If you're dipping your toe into peat-free, using a peat-reduced compost can help a smooth transition to becoming a peatless plotter.



Bags often carry useful information on compost-industry schemes which the manufacturer subscribes to, such as the Growing Media Initiative, whose dragonfly logo is used by companies demonstrating they are 'environmentally conscious' and committed to peat reduction. Bags that carry quality assurance scheme logos such as these are the Rolls-Royce among peat-free composts.

## WATCH OUT FOR WEEDKILLER

Any peat-free (or peat-reduced) composts (or growing bags) using composted green waste containing traces of weedkiller residue can affect plants. Tomatoes are especially sensitive, as shown below, where the new leaves are starting to curl. Such incidents are thankfully rare, but if you experience this problem, take an affected plant and the suspect compost back to your supplier.



## New bags on the block

Two new peat-frees are West+ Light & Easy, made from expanded wood fibres, which promises to feed plants for four months, and Miracle-Gro Expand 'n Gro, made from coir, which expands when you add water, and claims to feed for six months. Both boast a 'lightweight' selling point. Light & Easy only entered my trial in late 2011, but shows promise.

## DON'T MITHER OVER MOULD

The first time I found some greyish 'mould' inside a bag of peat-free, I was surprised, but it didn't affect my plants. Like mini-mushrooms, which occasionally appear in peat-frees, this is just a sign of biological, potentially healthy activity in the compost – it's nothing to fret about.

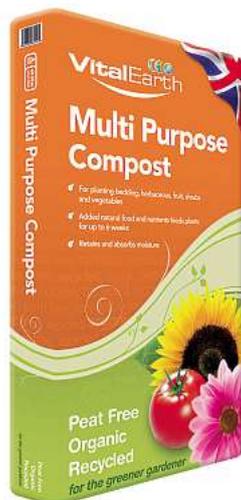


## My six do-buy peat-free composts

This is a list of what I've found to be the top six most reliable peat-frees currently worth using, to suit all pockets. My choice is based on how well each compost grew a range of different kitchen garden crops; consistently good performers made it on to the list (you can see some of the crops in my trial featured in last month's KG, May 2012). Prices shown are typical for a single bag, excluding delivery (if applicable).

### 1. Vital Earth Multi Purpose (VE):

Excellent value, this delight-to-handle, top-performing all-rounder encouraged plants with very strong roots, and has real oomph when it comes to the staying power of its plant foods. Made from UK-sourced composted garden waste, bark and organic nutrients. Vital Earth is a Growing Media Initiative Gold Member. 60l bag @ £5.99 = 10p/litre. [www.thegreenergardener.com](http://www.thegreenergardener.com)



Vital Earth was a top performer.

### 2. New Horizon Organic and Peat Free Multi-Purpose (NH):

Peat-free folk on Twitter gave this a unanimous thumbs up, which is no surprise as it's one of Which? Gardening's 'best buy' container composts for 2012. I had great results with sowing seeds, potting up plug plants and growing on. Small bags are sold in Wilkinson's. Excellent value and lovely texture. 50l bag @ £5.99 = 12p/litre. [www.william-sinclair.co.uk](http://www.william-sinclair.co.uk)



New Horizon is widely available.

### 3. Carbon Gold All Purpose Biochar Compost (CGA):

A newer peat-free, and also the most expensive. Based on coir, with biochar ('super charcoal'), seaweed, mycorrhizal fungi, wormcasts and vegetable-based nutrients, it's certified as organic by the Soil Association. Like Fertile Fibre, it (along with Carbon Gold Seed Compost) gave disappointing results with seeds, but grew strong, healthy plants. 20l bag @ £8.95 = 45p/litre. [www.carbongold.com](http://www.carbongold.com)

There's growing interest in using biochar, a type of 'super charcoal', to both increase the fertility and water holding abilities of seed and potting composts, as

well as garden soil. Biochar locks up carbon in a stable form, which can help you play a part in back garden climate-cooling. My trials have shown that adding biochar to my favourite peat-frees does have a beneficial effect on growth. You can buy 'raw' biochar from [www.carbongold.com](http://www.carbongold.com) and [www.oxfordbiochar.com](http://www.oxfordbiochar.com)



**4. Garden compost + leaf mould (GCL):**

My 50:50 mixture of well rotted compost and three-year-old leafmould is hyper-local, needs no processing or packaging, has a zero 'compost footprint', and is free. I use a 5mm (1/4in) sieve, mix both thoroughly in a builder's bag, then store in reused compost sacks. I use it 'straight' with good results. Straight from your garden.



**5. Fertile Fibre Multipurpose (FFM):**

Despite giving poor results when used for seed raising, I'm recommending this organically-approved coir mix as it's capable of producing, from seedlings/plugs, strong plants with impressive roots (plus I've recently heard from the supplier reassuring me that their composts are now 'germination tested' before being sent out). 35l bag @ £11.95 = 34p/litre. Mail order. [www.fertilefibre.com](http://www.fertilefibre.com)



Fertile Fibre produced strong plants from seedlings and plugs.

**6. Wool Compost (WC):**

This finely-textured compost, made from composted UK sheep's wool and bracken is a pleasure to handle. Although the bag doesn't specify using it for sowing (the information's rather

ambiguous), I found it worked well with seeds, so is a worthwhile investment to get plants off to a good start. 30l bag @ £12.95 = 43p/litre. Mail order. [www.dalefootcomposts.co.uk](http://www.dalefootcomposts.co.uk)



Wool Compost from Dalefoot Composts.

