

For peat's sake

Peat-based compost is bad for the environment, but are greener alternatives any good? John Walker investigates. Picture: Liz McBurney

Compost, whether it's seed, potting or multi-purpose, is the fuel on which we run our gardens. It's something we all need, and always will. It's piled high at garden outlets right now, and the one you choose to put in your plot's fuel tank can have profound knock-on effects for the natural world.

My own garden has been running smoothly on greener "fuel" for many years - meaning I garden without peat-based compost. The interlinked problems of using mined peat - habitat destruction, loss of biodiversity, release of fossil carbon stores - have had more airplay than any other gardening activity with a direct and detrimental effect on our environment. Peat is something to which we should all doff our hats: most plants thrive in it and it's helped our horticultural industry to flourish. But we're using peat faster than nature is replenishing it. Gardeners use two-thirds of the peat consumed in the UK. Most of that's imported, meaning we're actually exporting environmental damage.

Although some plants I bring into my garden are grown in peat-based compost, more and more are raised in compost that's 100% peat-free (some are available as mail-order plugs). A growing number of nurseries have already switched to commercial peat-free composts. The National Trust's gardeners, say, haven't used peat for many moons.

But don't go getting the idea that it's only the professionals or lifelong gardeners such as myself who can

grow great plants without peat: anyone can use a reliable, peat-free compost to sow, pot, propagate and grow in. Using peat-free compost isn't the tricky bit, but choosing one that performs consistently well, from bag to bag, can be.

Last spring, my greenhouse became a testing ground for almost 30 peat-free composts, almost all of them available to gardeners. This overkill of choice isn't helping peat-free escape its reputation for being poor, unreliable and inconsistent. I grew plants of all types and prices, from potatoes to primroses, in composts sourced from DIY stores, garden centres, supermarkets and mail-order suppliers.

My motivation was to see whether the "all peat-free is rubbish" mantra had anything to it, or if it's more a convenient myth. Many months of note-taking and snapshots later, I can report that any talk of "rubbish" is long past its use-by date. It's true that some peat-frees aren't fit for gardening, but some planet-friendly composts will give good, reliable results time and again.

Only a handful grew strong, healthy plants in my trial, so it's easy

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NEW HORIZON COMPOST AND SPEAR & JACKSON SPADE PROVIDED BY NORTH ONE GARDEN CENTRE (NIGG.CO.UK); ALAMY



Peat-free composts have come a long way in recent years. Pictured on spade (from top, left to right): New Horizon; Carbon Gold; Fertile Fibre; Wool and Vital Earth

to understand why some people are driven back to using peat. "Peat-free" on a bag is no guarantee of success (always check it's suitable for sowing and/or containers, and isn't only a planting compost/soil improver).

These are my top six peat-free composts for sowing, potting and containers (prices are a guide only and exclude any delivery charge): **New Horizon organic and peat-free multipurpose compost** Widely available, pleasant texture, and a 2012 Which? Gardening best buy container compost. For sowing, potting and containers; £5.99 for 50 litres, from longacres.co.uk.

Vital Earth multipurpose compost Made from composted garden waste and bark, with long-lasting nutrients. For sowing, potting young plants, filling containers and propagation; £5.99 for 60 litres, from thegreengardener.com.

Carbon Gold all-purpose biochar compost Delightful to handle, coir-based mix containing biochar (a "super charcoal" that locks up carbon), wormcasts, mycorrhizal fungi and seaweed. Certified organic. For growing on seedlings, plugs and potting. Though at £8.95 for a 20-litre bag, this is one with which to spoil treasured plants; from carbongold.com.

Wool compost Made from composted bracken and wool waste, this finely textured mix is good for sowing, potting up plug plants, and filling containers. At £12.95 for 30 litres, you'll want to use it wisely; from dalefootcomposts.co.uk.

Fertile Fibre multipurpose compost Organically certified, this coir mix grew healthy plants with extensive

roots (although some seeds germinated poorly in it). For growing on seedlings and plug plants, and for taking cuttings; £11.95 for a 35-litre bag, from fertilefibre.com.

And the sixth, and greenest, of them all? Well, that's the compost I mix myself using a 50-50 blend of garden compost and three-year-old leaf mould, both finely sieved. Although any weed seedlings are a nuisance, both seeds, seedlings and plug plants grew well, outperforming some bought peat-frees. It doesn't cost a penny, keeps me fit (sieving reawakens unfamiliar muscles) and clocks up not a single "compost mile".

If you've been lulled into thinking that peat-free is harder to use than peat-based, it's time to shed another myth: modern peat-frees will give you good results whatever your level of experience - success with peat-free requires no more than a little familiarisation (which includes reading the instructions on the bag). If you're unsure about watering, test the surface with your finger: if it's moist underneath, don't water. Feel the weight of the pot, too; if it feels heavy and the plant's not wilting, it doesn't need watering.

Almost all seeds, both large and small, can be sown in peat-free compost, especially if you choose a finer mix specifically for sowing. If you're using a peat-free multipurpose, sieve a 1cm layer of finer compost and sow smaller seeds in that.

How To Create An Eco Garden, by John Walker, is published by Aquamarine at £14.99. To order a copy for £9.99, go to guardian.co.uk/bookshop or call 0330 333 6846. Visit earthfriendlygardener.net to see more of John Walker's ongoing trials of peat-free compost.