

GROWING MEDIA (POTTING COMPOSTS)

The table (overleaf) sets out the proportions of ingredients in a basic range of potting composts as a *percentage*. Each mix has distinctly different uses and properties. Making your own mix allows you to produce exactly the right medium for the intended use.

The list progresses from those which require minimum fertility and a structure which will encourage cuttings and small seeds to form strong root systems, to those which need added fertility to allow established plants and seedlings to grow on strongly. The ingredients are arranged similarly, from those which are more **structural and inert** (left), to those which are more *fertile* (right).

This selection maximises the use of ingredients which can be obtained freely from local sources. Good organic practices should include managing all the resource cycles which will make these ingredients available: making garden **compost**, **leafmould**, **loam** and creating improved, weedfree **topsoil**. Saving money by sourcing bulky ingredients yourself means you can afford the inputs which have to be bought in, such as perlite, vermiculite and concentrated fertilisers. These more expensive ingredients can be reduced or even omitted, but this will reduce the effectiveness of the final products.

Powdered lime, dolomite or calcified seaweed can be added to suit the requirements of lime-lovers, such as onions and cabbages. Rockdusts can be added if a long, slow release of fertility is required. Media for acid-loving, ericaceous plants can be produced by using leafmould made out of evergreen leaves or composts that have been digested anaerobically.

Commercial mixes use peat, processed sewage or coconut fibre in place of leafmould. Peat extraction has been reduced in this country, which helps to save British peat bogs, but supply has been met by imports, from countries such as Lithuania.

Commercial products also minimise or exclude the use of soil, to reduce weight, which makes them cheaper to transport, but requires the addition of extra slow release (often chemical) fertilisers. Mixes which include soil are more resilient and long-lasting. Soil acts as a buffer producing a more enduring and forgiving medium which requires less regular watering and will last longer before it needs to be replaced.

Loam and topsoil will have different qualities according to the nature of the mother soil from which they are formed:

- * Sandy soils can be used in the finer consistency media, such as for seed-sowing.
- * Clay soils are only suitable for rougher mixes for more mature plants.
- * Silt or alluvial soils and any soil which has a high humus content can be included in both.

Using soil in potting media produces plants which are prepared for and adapted to the type of conditions they will encounter when they are transplanted.

TIPS

- Mix bulky ingredients together first, then add concentrated fertilisers.
- Add perlite or vermiculite next to check the concentrates are distributed evenly throughout the mix. Move the batch from end to end of a container to make sure it is mixed thoroughly.
- Rubbing the finer mixes by hand adds minute amounts of enzymes, hormones and auxins which can promote growth.
- Most mixes can be used immediately, but those which contain volatile substances (such as raw compost and blood, fish & bone) should be left to mature and settle for several days.

RIDDLING

- 2 cm / one inch mesh produces rough grade material suitable for large seed or potting on media. Larger stones or twigs can be saved and used for drainage in the bottom of pots.
- 1cm / half inch mesh produces fine particles. Stones that do not pass through the riddle can be saved for use as grit.

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INERT / STRUCTURAL — INGREDIENTS — FERTILE / STRONG

%	GRIT	SAND	PERLITE or VERMICULITE	LEAF MOULD FINE	LEAF MOULD ROUGH	LOAM FINE	TOP SOIL	COMPOST FINE	COMPOST ROUGH	SEA WEED MEAL	GROSAFE Blood, Fish & Bone
CUTTINGS	20	20	30	30							
SEED SMALL		30	30	40							
SEEDLING PRICKING OUT			27	50		10		10		2	1
SEED MEDIUM		18	30	40		10				2	
SEED LARGE		10	25	30		20		10		3	2
POTTING ON YOUNG			20		22		25	25		5	3
POTTING ON MATURE			10		20		30		30	5	5