Composts and Propagation – Products and Methods that work for me

Article by Jim Stockwell 30th April 2025

Introduction

Most growers are finding it difficult to get reliable results with peat free composts. Peat makes an excellent growing medium: it retains moisture well without being too wet and if it gets a bit dry it is relatively easy to rewet; it also retains mineral plant nutrients long enough for plants to grow away well, ready to be potted on or planted out. With peat free composts growers are experiencing lots of problems. The most common problems:

- **Poor germination of seeds**. Manufacturers keep changing ingredients but continue to use the same product description. So, what works one year may fail completely the next.
- **Compost drying out and becoming almost impossible to re-wet** – to help I add about 20% fine vermiculite. to both seed compost and pricking out compost.

- **Conversely it is easy to overwater** because the surface of the peat free compost looks dry when in fact there's plenty of moisture below the surface.

I use a cheap moisture meter to monitor moisture level (see image – available from Amazon for £10) or simply pick up the pot/tray – only water if needed and water from below whenever possible.

- **Plants "sulk" and don't grow away** – most likely due to loss of mineral nutrients either because the compost is more than 3 months old or because nutrients are washed out very quickly through normal watering. Even the best quality products (such as Melcourt SylvaGrow) only include enough nutrients to last for 4-6 weeks.

Seedsowing

For the past three years I've used FertileFibre seed compost – available online from FertileFibre. I add about 20% fine grade vermiculite to this to help with drainage – this also helps seedling roots separate when pricking out. I also cover seeds with fine grade vermiculite.

Results have been very good with high germination rates and no damping off.

My first sowings were in early February and I use a thermostatically controlled propagator with LED grow lights which are on for about 14 hours per day. These are now much cheaper than they used to be and use much less electricity than other forms of lighting. I bought Sunblaster T5 LED Nano Propagation Lights from **Hydroponicsforless**. Various lengths are available. With these lights seedlings don't get leggy and develop very well.

Pricing Out

I use Melcourt SylvaGrow Multipurpose peat free available from Southdowns Garden Centre in Hassocks and Stavertons Garden Centre (near Halland on the A22).

Whatever compost you use, it must be fresh. Unlike peat-based composts peat free composts are bio-active and nutrient content declines in the bag. The big advantage of Melcourt composts is that the bag has a date stamp showing when it was made – see below

Currently I'm using compost bought on 12th April which had been made on 2nd April (see date circled red above).

I add 10-20% fine vermiculite to help retain moisture and also 2 or 3g per litre of controlled-release fertiliser such as MiracleGrow. This ensures plants have nutrients for up to 6 months and helps keep them looking good until I sell them or plant them in the garden.

Potting On - annuals

I usually prick seedings into half size standard trays with 12 cells. For some annual plants I sell them from these trays but for many I prefer to pot them on after about 3 weeks into 9cm square pots (e.g. cosmos, antirrhinum, cleome and tomatoes). The compost I use for this job is a 50:50 mixture of Sylvagrow (with 2 or 3g per litre of controlled release fertiliser) and John Innes No 2 or No 3 compost. I make my own home-made JI compost using this formula:

Jim's Potting Compost formula			
	JI 1	**JI 2**	**JI 3**
Potting mix - per 100 litres			
	litres	litres	litres
Loam or good garden soil	40	40	40
Sieved very well rotted leafmould	30	30	30
Sieved very well rotted garden compost	10	10	10
Horticultural grit or sharp sand	20	20	20
Total volume	100	100	100
Fertiliser:	grammes	grammes	grammes
Either JI Base Fertiliser g	300	600	900
OR slow release fertiliser g	150	300	450
Ground chalk or magnesium limestone g	60	120	180

Normally I use half JI Base Fertiliser and half slow-release fertiliser.

Potting Perennials

Here I just use my home-made JI compost. In spring I use MiracleGro slow release fertiliser, but in summer and autumn when I'm potting plants that will stay in post for a long time, I use 12month controlled release fertiliser, which I get online from this e-bay vendor The Garden IMP