

# Compost for raising plants

We test compost bought from four areas of the UK to ensure recommended composts are consistently good



Don't buy old compost - be sure to buy the bag designs shown

## What we tested for

- **Germination** How many seeds germinated and how well they grew
- **Quality** How robust seedlings and plug plants were and how good their leaf colour was
- **Consistency** Was growth of seeds and plants the same across all the pots
- **Texture** Was compost coarse or fine, wet or smelly, or containing fungus gnats or rubbish

The sight of new seedlings emerging from compost brings with it hope of a great gardening year. When they fail to germinate and grow, you're left wondering where you went wrong. All too often the problem isn't your technique – it's the compost itself.

Good compost can't be judged by eye alone. Even if it isn't encased in bright, opaque packaging, no one can tell whether the fertiliser mix is correct or whether the particular mix of bulky materials, such as coir or wood fibre, will suit your plants. The only way to tell which will be best is to grow plants, which is precisely what we do.

## What we did

We chose two seeds and two young plants to grow. We always choose a large seed that is easy to germinate and a small seed that is a little more fussy. This way we can judge whether composts will do well across the board. We count the number of seedlings that emerge and rate them for size and vigour, which we judge on their leaf colour and whether they are straggly or robust. This year, we opted for Cabbage 'Caraflex' as the large seed and Antirrhinum 'Floral Showers' F1, as antirrhinums notoriously tricky to germinate. Both are Best Buy varieties.

We chose Tomato 'Balconi Red' to grow for our young plants trial. This was germinated from seed and grew on to the two-true-leaf stage – the point at which you would usually re-pot the seedlings. We also

grew on Begonia 'Heaven Series', an F1 semperflorens type we bought as plug plants grown from seed.

Tomatoes are hungry feeders, so we expected those potted in a compost with low fertiliser levels to struggle by the end of the test. Begonias are less hungry than tomatoes, but they like a free-draining compost and grow slowly if they are placed in a wet one.

Manufacturers start to make compost in October and continue through to spring the following year. We instructed our team of mystery shoppers in four different areas of the country to buy bags of compost from 22 different brands as soon as they become available in DIY superstores or garden centres.

By buying it in different areas we hoped to find composts that had been made at different times, and highlight any differences. This might include too much or too little fertiliser being added to the mix, or the proportion of bulk ingredients having been tweaked to balance it out.

We started our seed-sowing test in April – the perfect time for the seeds we had chosen. The tomato seedlings and begonias were potted up for the raising young plants test in early May, when most gardeners will be doing this at home. The weather was on our side this year, with temperatures in the greenhouse averaging 21°C through the period we were growing the seeds and the young plants. There was also a good number of sunny days.

We sowed seeds in three trays of compost taken from bags from all four areas of the country – this made 12 seed trays for each compost brand. We used quarter trays with 25 seeds in each, making a total of 300 seeds per compost. For young plants, we filled five pots from bags bought from the four different areas of the country and grew a single plant in each.

During our tests, several composts were reformulated by the manufacturers and one was withdrawn from sale. This means that we can only report on 15 brands for each test.

Sowing seeds and raising young plants  
Not everyone needs a full bag of compost to sow their seeds and another for their young plants. These composts will do a great job for both tasks

## Best Buys



**Thompson & Morgan Incredicompost** Price per litre: 21p  
**Best overall**  
Sowing seeds **95%**  
Raising young plants **90%**

This compost was launched last year by mail-order seed and plant company Thompson & Morgan. It is made from a mix of 80% Irish peat and 20% wood fibre. It had the highest germination rate by far for the antirrhinum seeds and close to perfect germination for cabbage seeds. The seedlings were all very healthy. The young begonias were the best in the test and the tomatoes were robust plants. However, with delivery it is an expensive compost.

**Price and size of bag:** £14.99 for 70 litres, plus £4.95 delivery  
**Peat content:** 80%  
**Where to buy:** Thompson & Morgan



**Verve Multipurpose Compost** Price per litre: 8p  
**Consistently good**  
Sowing seeds **80%**  
Raising young plants **76%**

This is a peat-reduced compost containing 58% Irish peat, along with green waste and coir. Green-waste compost is notoriously variable in quality, although we didn't see much evidence of this across the four batches of this compost.

All the cabbage seeds germinated, although only just over half the antirrhinum seeds germinated, which was low compared with other composts. All the seedlings grew into strong plants. The tomatoes had some of the best foliage colour in the test.

**Price and size of bag:** £3.86 for 50 litres  
**Peat content:** 58%  
**Where to buy:** B&Q

## Peat free?

If you want a peat-free compost for both jobs, we'd recommend

Melcourt SylvaGrow. It's a Best Buy compost for raising young plants and

it scored almost as well as our Best Buy compost for sowing seeds.



**Sowing seeds** Seeds are self-contained packages that have everything inside them to germinate and start to grow. Tiny seedlings don't need and are damaged by – high fertiliser levels, but they need good drainage

## Best Buy



### Verve Sowing & Cutting Compost 50L

Price per litre: 11p **Peat reduced 80%**

A different formulation to the 12L version (below), this peat-reduced potting compost is made up of 40% peat and the rest is coir.

This makes a fine, fluffy mixture that was ideal for seeds.

Almost all the cabbage seeds germinated and seedlings were large and strong. As with other composts in the test, antirrhinum

germination was lower, although most pots produced a good amount of seedlings that most gardeners would be happy with.

**Price and size of bag:** £5.72 for 50 litres  
**Peat content:** 40%  
**Where to buy:** B&Q

## Recommended

### Verve Sowing & Cutting Compost 12L

Price per litre: 32p  
**Excellent quality 75%**

This compost is very similar to the 50L version, although this one has a higher peat content, at 75%, and bark fines, but no coir. It was a Best Buy for raising young plants last year and did well in the test this year.

The antirrhinum-seed germination rate was high and the seedlings grew strongly to a good size. Almost all of the cabbage seeds germinated, and the seedlings grew well to be some of the strongest and healthiest in the test.

**Price and size of bag:** £3.83 for 12 litres  
**Peat content:** 75%  
**Where to buy:** B&Q



### Gro-Sure Seed & Cutting Compost

Price per litre: 25p  
**Excellent cabbage seedlings 75%**

This compost is a very traditional mix of peat, sand and vermiculite, so should have the ideal properties for seeds, as it's low in nutrients and well-drained. The compost was fluffy and easy to handle.

The cabbage seeds had a 99% germination rate and the scores were the highest for size and second for quality. The antirrhinum seeds germinated more patchily. In some pots, most seeds germinated; in others, only a few seedlings appeared, but were still rated as very good for size and quality.

**Price and size of bag:** £4.99 for 20 litres  
**Peat content:** 87%  
**Where to buy:** Garden centres



## Don't Buy



### Gro-Sure Peat Free All-Purpose Compost with 4 months feed

Price per litre: 12p  
**Very acidic 33%**

This Don't Buy compost is peat-free and made from wood fibre, coir and composted bark. We found it had a pH of around 4.5, which is much too acidic for most plants. We also found very high nutrient levels, especially of nitrogen and sulphates, which are combined with potassium and other nutrients in fertilisers.

Seeds don't need high nutrient levels and struggle to survive if too much fertiliser is in the compost.

These high nutrient levels and low pH would explain why few of the antirrhinum seeds germinated and both cabbage and antirrhinum seedlings were pale or yellowing.

**Price and size of bag:** £5.99 for 50 litres  
**Peat content:** 0%  
**Where to buy:** Garden centres

COMPOST FOR SOWING SEEDS	SPECIFICATION	WHICH? TEST PERFORMANCE				TEST SCORE	
		PRICE	PEAT CONTENT	CABBAGE SEEDS	ANTIRRHINUM SEEDS		
<b>THOMPSON &amp; MORGAN</b> Incredicompost		£14.99 for 70 litres	21p	80%	*****	*****	95%
<b>VERVE</b> Multipurpose Compost		£3.86 for 50 litres	8p	58%	*****	***	80%
<b>VERVE</b> Sowing & Cutting Compost 50L		£5.72 for 50 litres	11p	40%	*****	****	80%
<b>GRO-SURE</b> Seed & Cutting Compost		£4.99 for 20 litres	25p	87%	*****	***	75%
<b>MELCOURT</b> SylvaGrow Sustainable Growing Medium		£6.99 for 50 litres	14p	0%	*****	****	75%
<b>VERVE</b> Sowing & Cutting Compost 12L		£3.83 for 12 litres	32p	75%	****	****	75%
<b>VERVE</b> Peat Free Multipurpose Compost		£2.73 for 12 litres	23p	0%	*****	***	70%
<b>FERTILE FIBRE</b> Seed Compost		£17 for 60 litres	28p	0%	****	***	63%
<b>WESTLAND</b> Jack's Magic All Purpose Compost		£6.99 for 60 litres	12p	95%	*****	***	63%
<b>GROWISE</b> Multipurpose Compost		£5.99 for 50 litres	12p	52%	****	***	58%
<b>WESTLAND</b> Multi-purpose Compost with John Innes		£6.99 for 60 litres	12p	73%	****	***	58%
<b>FERTILE FIBRE</b> Multipurpose Compost		£17 for 60 litres	28p	0%	***	***	50%
<b>WESTLAND</b> Multi-purpose Compost		£4.99 for 50 litres	10p	70%	***	***	45%
<b>VERVE</b> John Innes Seed Sowing compost		£3.67 for 20 litres	18p	50%	**	***	43%
<b>GRO-SURE</b> Peat Free All-Purpose Compost with 4 Month Feed		£5.99 for 50 litres	12p	0%	***	*	33%

USING THE TABLE The more stars the better. Best Buys are highlighted in red, Recommended in blue and Don't Buys in grey. Score: Ignores price and is based on: equal weighting for cabbage and antirrhinum seed. Germination 33.3%, size 33.3%, and quality 33.3%.

## Why weren't last year's Best Buys still Best Buys this year?

This year, we had many more composts that did well compared with last year. All of our Best Buys for sowing seeds last year either regained their Best Buy status, or were within a few marks of making the grade. In the raising young plants test, both Westland Jack's Magic All Purpose Compost and Westland Multipurpose Compost with John Innes were good, but not outstanding. Levington Original Multipurpose Compost will be reformulated and would have been a Don't Buy for raising young plants.

## What makes Don't Buys perform so badly?

For the first time this year, badly performing composts were analysed for nutrition levels, pH and electrical conductivity, which is a measure of the amount of dissolved salts in the compost.

We found that many of the composts had significant problems with fertiliser levels. Some seemed to have far too much, making the compost extremely acidic, which is bad for both seeds and young plants. Others were drastically low in nutrient levels, especially nitrogen, suggesting plants were left struggling

for the basic ingredient needed to fuel growth. In some instances, the nutrient levels were affected by the bulk materials used. For example, composted green waste is generally high in chlorides, but this locks up nitrogen, making it unavailable to plants, which leads to poor growth rates. For more on this see News, p4.

