

Get your garden peat free

From making our own compost to thinking before we buy, **Kate Bradbury** reveals how we can help protect peatlands from our gardens.

Leaf mould

Leaf mould is an exceptional material, made from leaves that have been left to break down on their own. The easiest way to make it is to fill old compost bags or bin bags with wet autumn leaves, add a few holes to the bag and leave behind your shed.

Compost heap

Start a compost heap or fill a bin with a mix of 'green' leafy material, food waste (excluding cooked waste, meat and dairy products) and 'brown' woody material such as twigs and cardboard.

Avoid adding large amounts of green material, like lawnmower clippings, as this can make the compost sludgy. Check regularly to ensure it's breaking down.

Wild haven

Compost mounds are great for wildlife. Rotting waste is a buffet for many invertebrates, which themselves attract predators like beetles, newts and shrews. Grass snakes lay eggs in compost heaps and toads will use them for hibernation sites.

Tree choice

Leaves of ash, beech, birch, cherry, elm, hornbeam, lime, oak, poplar and willow will break down and be ready to use in a year. Leaves of hawthorn, maple, magnolia, sycamore and horse chestnut take longer to break down (up to three years).


Peat forms when dead vegetation falls into waterlogged soil and doesn't fully rot away. It's found in wetland habitats, such as peat bogs and moors, and grows at a rate of just 1mm per year. These slow-growing 'peatlands' are incredibly diverse habitats, home to rare bog plants and mosses, invertebrates like dragonflies and beetles, and birds such as golden plovers and curlews. They're not just a fantastic wildlife habitat — peatlands store masses of carbon; over three billion tonnes are stored in British peatbogs alone.

Tragically, despite its incredible value, peat is also widely used as an ingredient in potting composts. Lightweight, water retentive and low in nutrients, peat has long been regarded as the best growing medium for a number of growing situations. It's highly likely that, unless you actively sought out peat-free compost, you will have unwittingly bought compost containing peat. This is dug out of peat bogs in the UK, Ireland and eastern Europe, damaging these wild habitats while releasing carbon dioxide into the atmosphere.

In 2010 the Government announced it was to phase out the use of peat in horticulture over a 10-year period, to 2020. Sadly we have missed this target and peat-based composts remain the most popular choice in garden centres. You can buy peat-free compost if you know where to look. Made from a variety of materials including coir, composted food waste, bracken and sheep's wool, peat-free compost isn't always the cheapest option and few garden centres have a wide range to choose from. Some garden centres don't stock peat-free composts at all.

However, it's important to persevere. If your local garden centre doesn't sell peat-free compost online, some suppliers offer a discount for bulk orders — why not group together with neighbours and save money? However you do it, always make sure you buy peat-free compost. Peat-based materials simply aren't worth losing our wildlife, and our planet over.

Gardens of all sizes are an essential part of a Nature Recovery Network. For more tips visit

 wildlifetrusts.org/nature-recovery-network



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Leaf piles

Make sure to leave some leaves for your garden wildlife throughout the year. A leaf pile can shelter moths over winter and provide nesting material for hedgehogs in summer.

Peat-free potting mix

You can make your own peat-free compost easily, using one part garden soil, one part leaf mould and one part sieved garden compost. For mixes requiring lower nutrients (for example if you're using it to sow seeds), use one part garden soil, one part leaf mould and one part horticultural sand.

Pot plant background check

Many potted plants are grown in peat compost. Check the labels and ask your garden centre to make sure the plants you're buying weren't grown in peat-based compost.