healthy
HOME

# Celebrate St. Patty's Day With Dirt: How to make your own potting soil for delicate spring seedlings.

If you're a gutsy gardener like me, then you've probably experimented with many types of soil and have found, like me, that delicate seeds only grow in quality potting soil. Yep, I've found out soil straight from the yard is not gonna' cut it and reusing old soil won't either – you've just got to use a well-made blend to reap any kind of seedling success.

It's true, garden centers have stacks and stacks of potting soil with many different ingredients, promises, and stamps of approval – but, as in most things, DIY potting soil is possible, affordable, and easy.

In my experience, there are plenty of free and natural potting soil ingredients and plenty of low cost all-natural potting soil ingredients that can be purchased, that, when combined thoughtfully, create stellar potting soil for seedlings, raised beds, and general garden crops. For starters, let's talk good ol' garden soil... Garden soil, as I mentioned above, should never be used on its own. But, because it is free, and can be manipulated to "work" in a potting mix, I say take advantage of your plot. However, garden soil is very dense - so dense that, if not combined with other natural ingredients, it will kill or stunt the seedlings.

If you have access to garden soil that is organic and free of pesticides, chemical fertilizers, and other eco- pollutants, go ahead and use it as an ingredient, but, if you're unsure of its purity, solarize it first. To solarize, cover a pile of your soil with clear plastic for at least one to two months. Although this process sounds quite long, four to eight weeks of sun exposure is the only natural way to destroy the pathogens, chemicals, and weeds that can harm your itty bitty seedlings.

If you plan on using your garden soil to make potting soil, always keep an unused portion of your soil covered and baking in the sun. If you get into the habit, you'll always have pure and ready-to-go soil on hand.

*How about some compost...*

Some of my most successful batches of potting soil were up to 40% compost – and I just love to see my family's food waste create new food. Compost that contains fruit skins, veggie pieces, eggshells, and other vegetarian scraps works wonders in a potting mixture. The vitamins, minerals, and healthy chemical properties from the scraps seep deep into the soil and create an optimal growing environment. Although, for safe compost, it must always be brought to high temperatures – just like solarized earth.

The high temps destroy all the pathogens, chemicals, and pesticides that taint crops. If you're actively composting your kitchen and garden scraps, I encourage you to keep your compost bin well managed and definitely use your compost in all your potting soil mixtures.

*Bring on some sand...*

Whenever Ben and I are working on a garden project we always use some kind of course sand. Course sand adds texture for the seedlings to root in and also creates tiny drainage pockets that protect the tiny seedling's new roots from root rot.

*Slap in some sphagnum peat moss...*

Peat moss is an excellent and very cheap potting soil bulking agent that holds up for a long time. Peat moss also does a terrific job at holding on to moisture so that seedlings always have a natural source to extract moisture from and feed. If you add peat moss to your mixture, be sure to add finely ground limestone. The lime will adjust the pH, preventing the moss from creating an overly acidic environment. Coir fiber from coconut... This stuff looks a lot like peat moss, but is more dense in nutrients and much more pH stable. Yep, there's a catch here – compressed bricks of coir cost much more than peat moss. If you're pinching pennies, go with peat moss - there really isn't a huge functionality difference between the two products.

*Pile in some perlite...*

Perlite is a sterile, lightweight, pH neutral, and porous volcanic rock great for holding in moisture and increasing drainage. If you're using sand, you can skip the perlite and vice versa.

*Vermiculite...*

Vermiculite, similar to perlite, is a great water holding medium that creates extra moisture coverage and drainage. Unlike perlite, vermiculite seeps calcium and magnesium into the soil – but – it contains asbestos. If you can't find perlite and really need a medium such as vermiculite, only use small amounts and cover your airways while working with the product. Naturally, keep the kiddos far away from vermiculite.

*Dolomitic limestone...*

Finely ground limestone is an excellent pH adjuster and works great while combined with acidic ingredients such as peat moss and sphagnum peat. Never underestimate the importance of proper pH – balance your potting soils pH per the seedling's needs. To do so, Google the seed that you're planting and research their optimal pH. After you have the proper information, use my tips to combine ingredients for the perfectly balanced pH.

*Composted pine bark...*

I always add composted pine bark to my mixes to ensure a light and airy consistency that won't stunt or crush my seedlings. Composted pine bark creates natural pockets of air within the potting mix. It can

soak up nitrogen - so always remember to pair composted pine bark with an all- natural nitrogen rich fertilizer.

*Nutrient rich fertilizers...*

There are plenty of options when deciding on fertilizers, but I recommend always going for 100% natural. Most gardeners I've worked with recommend choosing a handful of products from the following list and suggest you take some time to play around with a few combinations.

**Recommended options:**

- Alfalfa meal
- Blood meal
- Bone meal
- Cottonseed meal
- Crab meal
- Feather meal
- Fish meal
- Kelp meal
- Dehydrated manures
- Rock phosphate

Now that you have an idea of the many "free from the farm" and "affordable from the store" DIY seedling soil and potting soil ingredients, I thought I would share a few of my favorite soil mixture recipes.

*Let's go for it...*

**Jessa's "go-to" seedling potting soil:**

- 5 gallons compost
- 5 gallons coir peat
- 2.5 gallons vermiculite or sand
- 2.5 gallons worm castings

**Jessa's quick potting mix:**

- 2.5 gallons coir peat
- 2.5 gallons vermiculite or sand • 5 gallons compost
- 1/4 gallon worm casting

**Jessa's fortified mix:**

- 6 gallons sphagnum peat moss
- 1/4 cup limestone
- 41⁄4 gallons perlite

- 41⁄4 gallons vegetarian compost blended with composted pine bark
- 2 cups greensand
- 1/2 cup bone meal
- 1/4 cup kelp meal

Feel free to explore and experiment with the various ingredients available and create your own “go-to” seedling potting soil. You’ll be surprised how therapeutic working with natural earthy ingredients can be. Get dirty. Play. Experience a bit of gardening creativity and watch your seedlings grow.

*Now here’s to dirt,*

*Jessa*