

Potting soil or potting mix?

That is the question

Sometimes the words "potting soil" and "potting mix" are used interchangeably so it can be confusing. Potting soil is for non-container gardening. Potting mix is for everything else. A quality product will list its uses and ingredients so read the label to be sure it meets your gardening needs. Using the correct growing medium is the first step to success!

Potting soil, sometimes labeled as garden soil, is usually made up of "true dirt" which usually includes clay, sand, loam, and compost to mimic the best soils found in nature. It is not sterile and can contain fungi or weed seeds. Potting soil contains minerals and has higher moisture content, so it is heavier than potting mix. Because it is denser it may become compacted and require adding more organic material to maintain good soil drainage and texture. Many of today's products also contain fertilizers. If you are re-using potting soil from last season, replace 1/3 – 1/2 with new and mix well. **Never re-use soil from diseased or unhealthy plants.** Potting soil is used for non-container gardening and general landscape use.

Potting mix does not contain any actual dirt and is often labeled as a soilless growing medium. It usually contains ingredients to improve moisture control and air circulation such as peat or sphagnum moss, pine bark, coir from coconut husks and pumice, perlite, or vermiculite. These elements make it light and fluffy compared to potting soil,

which will make your potted plants lighter and easier to move. Potting mix usually has a slow-release fertilizer.

Frequent watering of containers will flush out soil nutrients. You may need to add additional fertilizer later in the season to keep your plants healthy and growing. The beneficial elements of potting mix break down over time, so it is not a good idea to reuse it. Add the old to your compost pile. Potting mix is sterile so it does not have any weed seeds or fungi that may interfere with germinating seeds and starting young plants. It works well for seed starting, container gardening and potted plants, both indoor and outdoor. For most container-grown plants an all-purpose potting mix will work well.

There are many specialty-potting mixes available for a variety of plant types.

- Organic potting mixes should contain only organic fertilizers. Check the label to be sure.
- Moisture control potting mixes absorb and retain more water than standard mixes.
- Seed starting mixes are very lightweight and dry. Wet the soil and allow the water to soak in completely before you add your seeds.
- Mixes for cacti and succulents contain sand for fast drainage. Some also contain pH adjusters to make the mix slightly alkaline.
- Orchid potting mix contains bark to enhance drainage and maintain airflow to the roots.

- African Violet mixes are formulated to meet their slightly acidic needs.

Choose the one that is best for your plants and have a great growing season!

You can get answers to all your gardening questions by visiting our website, www.tulsamastergardeners.org, by calling the Tulsa Master Gardeners Help Line at 918-746-3701 or by emailing us at mg@tulsamastergardeners.org, or come see us at our Diagnostic Center at 4116 E 15th St., Tulsa, OK.

Sources:

[HLA-6728 OSU Extension Service, Soilless Growing Mediums](#)

[HLA-6020 OSU Extension Service, Growing Vegetable Transplants](#)

Tulsa World "Ask a Master Gardener," January 21, 2025