

# 'Peat-free' potting soil aids environment



**Gardening**  
Carol Savonen  
Guest columnist

**Question:** Dear Carol, I often transplant my houseplants into new soil and pots in the winter. And each year, I buy indoor potting soil, I go through the agony of indecision. Peat moss is often an ingredient in the bagged potting mixtures. But these days, I'm seeing coir, or coconut husk material advertised as a more environmentally friendly soil amendment in potting mixes. Could you shed some light on this?

**Answer:** Both these fibers, peat moss and coir, are used as ingredients in potting soils for their water holding capacity. They also add bulk to the soil, which promotes good air circulation in the soil.

Peat moss has been mined for centuries from wetlands known as peatlands or bogs. Chunks of peat have been cut out, dried and used for cooking and heating by people in northern latitudes that live where trees or other fuels are

scarce. Ireland, Scotland, northern Canada and other northern cultures have typically used these fuels.

More recently, horticulturists have used peat moss in gardens and container plants. Sphagnum is the genus that has many species of these acid-producing mosses. The acidity they secrete inhibits bacterial growth and decomposition, so the moss layers build up over time.

Thick layers of peat mosses, sometimes dozens of feet deep, have such tremendous water holding capacity. Layer upon layer builds up, eventually forming vast acidic wetlands.

These peat wetlands are the single largest terrestrial store of carbon on earth, say, scientists. When humans mine peat, carbon gets released to the atmosphere, thereby contributing to atmospheric carbon dioxide (greenhouse gas) increases. Peat builds up only about a quarter inch per year. Harvesting removes deep layers of peat that are thousands of years old. Classified as wetlands, peat bogs help purify and store water.

Over the last 40 years, professionals

have identified more environmentally friendly soil amendments, including coconut coir, paper waste, and mixtures of other agricultural and industrial by-products. In the UK, they have vastly curtailed the horticultural use of peat and are using alternatives. Kew Gardens has been peat-free since 1992.

It takes some sleuthing, but it is possible to find alternatives to peat moss in seedling, potting and fertile mixes. Here are some things to pay attention to while shopping for potting mixes and amendments.

Read the labels on sacks of soil amendments, such as potting soil and planting mix. Ask for ingredient lists at landscape supply houses. Then request "peat-free" mixtures. Just because it is labeled "organic" or "green" doesn't mean it's peat-free. In fact, it could well contain 70 to 100 percent peat. Read the fine print. A peat-free mix will often highlight that fact in large print on the label.

Peat is high in fiber, which maintains good pore-space. It retains water and is low in nutrients. Peat is acidic. Functional substitutes for peat include:

Composted bark, made from by-products of the forest industry. On its own, composted bark it makes a great soil improver for poor or heavy soil. Larger-grade chipped bark is often used as weed-suppressing mulch. An added plus is that composted bark has been shown to suppress root diseases.

The downside to bark is that if it is incompletely composted, it has a very high in carbon to nitrogen ratio; bacteria breaking it down in the soil can "rob" nitrogen from the soil and your plants. But if it is well composted and is only one ingredient in a well-balanced multipurpose compost mix, it has shown to be a good substitute for peat.

Next week, I'll talk about coir, or "co-co peat," another peat substitute and some other amendments that can substitute for peat.

Carol Savonen is a naturalist and writer. She is an associate professor emeritus at OSU and tends a large garden in the Coast Range Hills west of Philomath with her husband and dogs. She can be reached at Carol.Savonen@oregonstate.edu or c/o: EESC, 422 Kerr Admin. Bldg., OSU, Corvallis, OR 97331.

# Flu season is here but it's not too late for shot

**David Davis**  
Salem Statesman Journal  
USA TODAY NETWORK

While influenza season has already arrived in Oregon, officials say it's not too late to get a flu shot.

"Ideally you're vaccinated before it hits," says Dr. Paul Cieslak, medical director for communicable disease and immunizations at Oregon Health Authority. But Cieslak says the vaccine can reduce the severity of symptoms and make it less likely that you'll land in the hospital.

The message comes as the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention kicks off National Influenza Vaccination Week during the first full week in December.

## Vaccines still widely available

Vaccine providers say supply has kept pace with demand this year and flu shots can be easily found across the state.

Flu shot seekers can find outlets near them by visiting [flu.oregon.gov](http://flu.oregon.gov).

After getting the flu shot, it generally takes the human body



**A man receives an influenza vaccination at a pharmacy in October 2018. Officials say it's not too late to get the flu shot.**

JOE RAEDLE, GETTY IMAGES

you cough or sneeze

- Clean/disinfect surfaces and objects that may be contaminated with germs

- If you have respiratory symptoms, don't visit sick people in the hospital, or if you must be here, wear a mask during your visit.

## Last flu season was severe

While early influenza numbers are tracking close to last year, it's still too early to tell if this flu season will be as severe as last, which was the deadliest in four decades according to estimates from the CDC.

"We lost 80,000 people last year to the flu," CDC director Dr. Robert Redfield told the Associated Press earlier this year.

The number is a jump from CDC estimates of flu deaths in recent years which have ranged from 12,000 to 56,000.

The number of adults who got a flu shot also declined from the previous season. An estimated 37.1 percent of Americans aged 18 and older got a flu shot, a drop of 6.2 percent from the 2016-17 season.

two weeks to produce antibodies necessary to combat influenza.

In addition to getting the flu shot Julie Koch, infection prevention manager at Salem Health, says people should be taking preventative actions to reduce exposure and spread of the flu including:

- Wash your hands
- Avoid close contact with sick people
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth
- Use good respiratory hygiene: Cover your nose and mouth with your elbow or a tissue when

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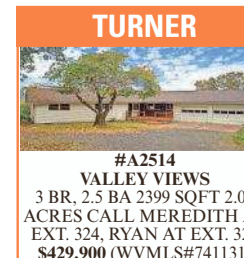
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