Potting Mix, Garden Soil, and Raised Bed Mix Decision Sheet

> **Companion Reference Sheet for:** Potting Mix vs Garden Soil vs Raised Bed Mix: What to Use Where
> Save this PDF to your phone or print a copy for field reference. Planting dates vary by site and season. Check your local extension office for your area.

Key Takeaways

- **Choose potting mix for containers.** Its light, aerated structure helps roots get air and lets excess water drain through drainage holes.
- **Use garden soil in the ground.** Improve it with compost when the soil needs more organic matter or better structure.
- **Build raised bed soil from suitable ingredients.** A common approach combines mineral soil or topsoil with compost and a drainage component.
- **Raised bed mixes vary.** Check the stated use, ingredient list, texture, drainage behavior, and nutrient information.
- **Keep seed starting mix for sowing seeds.** It is finer than general potting mix and usually has less fertilizer, which suits young seedlings.
- **Plan to replenish nutrients.** A new bag of mix does not feed plants indefinitely. Add compost or fertilizer based on the crop and the condition of the growing medium.

Choose the Growing Medium for the Space

Growing medium	Best use	Typical texture and ingredients	Drainage, weight, and fertility	What can go wrong in the wrong place
Potting mix	Pots, window boxes, and other containers with drainage holes	Usually a soilless blend of peat or coir, bark, and perlite or similar materials	Light and aerated, with ingredients that balance moisture retention and drainage. Fertility varies from lightly fed to nutrient rich.	In a large raised bed, it can be an expensive way to fill volume and may settle as organic ingredients break down.
Garden soil	In-ground garden beds, where it connects with the surrounding soil	Mineral particles mixed with organic matter; texture depends on the site	Usually heavier than potting mix. Drainage and fertility depend on the soil structure and its history.	In a small pot, it can compact, reduce air around roots, and drain poorly.
Raised bed mix	Raised beds, especially beds without access to suitable native soil	Often a blend of topsoil or mineral soil and compost; some blends include a drainage component	Weight and fertility vary with the ingredients. A well-made blend should hold moisture while allowing excess water to drain.	A product that is too light, too dense, or mostly compost may not provide the structure and nutrient balance the bed needs.

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Seed starting mix	Sowing seeds in trays and small starter pots	Fine, evenly textured materials such as peat or coir with perlite or another aerating ingredient	Usually holds moisture evenly and has less fertilizer than general potting mix.	Its fine texture and modest fertility are not a good long-term fit for larger, established plants.

Typical Situations and What to Choose

Situation	What to choose	Why it fits	Useful check
Small indoor pot or window box	Potting mix	A light, aerated blend suits the restricted root space.	Make sure the container has drainage holes and check how often it needs water.
Vegetable bed planted directly in the ground	Native garden soil, improved with compost as needed	Roots can grow into the surrounding soil rather than depending on a bagged container blend.	Assess soil structure, drainage, and the bed's nutrient history.
Raised bed with an open bottom	Topsoil or suitable mineral soil blended with compost	The bed can connect with suitable native soil below it.	Rutgers Cooperative Extension recommends a minimum 12 inch depth of imported topsoil for proper root-zone volume and drainage.
Raised bed with a closed bottom	Ready-made raised bed mix or a measured soil and compost blend	The full root zone depends on the material added to the bed.	Use the bed dimensions to estimate volume and select a mix with a stable texture.
Seed tray or small starter pot	Seed starting mix	Its fine texture supports small seeds and young roots.	Keep it evenly moist, then transplant as seedlings grow.

Field Checklist for Choosing a Mix

☐ **Identify the growing space.** Use potting mix for containers, garden soil for in-ground beds, and a soil-based blend for raised beds.

☐ **Check the bag's intended use and ingredients.** Do not rely on the words potting soil or raised bed soil alone.

☐ **Look for the right texture.** Container media should be light and aerated; a raised bed needs enough mineral structure to avoid settling into a dense mass.

☐ **Check drainage.** Confirm that pots have holes, and assess drainage in native soil before using it in an open-bottom bed.

☐ **Consider bed construction.** An open-bottom bed may use suitable native soil; a closed-bottom bed needs a complete growing medium.

☐ **Review fertility.** Note whether fertilizer is already included and plan how to replenish nutrients as plants grow.

☐ **Estimate the volume.** Measure the bed or container and compare cost per cubic foot before choosing bagged mix or separate ingredients.

☐ **Keep compost mature.** Do not fill a bed with compost alone; combine it with mineral soil or another suitable growing medium.

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