

Soil blocks

Using blocks of soil to grow plants is an ancient Mexican technique which has been adapted for the modern home and commercial gardener. A soil block is a compressed unit of compost which holds together negating the need for a pot. As seeds germinate and grow, their roots eventually reach the edge of the block, where they become exposed and 'air pruned'. This means they stop growing from the tip and develop a branched root system within the block. In a pot these roots would continue to grow and if not potted on or planted out, they can wrap around the inside of the pot causing the plant to become 'root bound'. A 'root bound' plant can suffer poor growth after it has been moved on or planted out.

Monty is trying out soil blocks in his garden and likes to make up his own mix. Here's the recipe he's currently using:

1 part garden soil

1 part leaf mould

1 part garden compost

1 part grit or vermiculite

4 parts coir

You could also use a shop-bought compost - John Innes mixes work best. But you may need to add loam or garden soil (as long as it isn't too sandy) to help it bind together.

Once you've mixed up your compost, make it very wet and mound it slightly on a flat surface. Then wet your soil blocker, push it down into the mix and squeeze out the new soil blocks onto a seed tray or flat wooden tray. It's important to remember to water soil blocks gently otherwise they can wash away, so if you're watering from above, try using a fine rose on your watering can or spray. Alternatively, line your trays with capillary matting and dip one end in water – that way, they'll be able to soak up moisture from beneath.