

# Thriving with the Seasons- Feb 2026 – Information before the launch in March 2026

## Laying the Foundations



## Seeds

If you can, choose organic or heritage seeds. The aim is not perfection, it is starting with good foundations.

### What I am buying or using

Crop / herb	Organic?	Heritage / open-pollinated?	Where from?
_____	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	_____
_____	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	_____
_____	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	_____
_____	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	_____
_____	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	_____

### 3) Compost and soil (the foundation)

Healthy soil, healthy plants. Same principle as us: you cannot thrive on emptiness.

#### Choose your approach

- I will make compost (greens + browns, keep it damp, turn when I can).
- I will buy compost (best I can afford, and get going).

#### My compost / soil notes

What I have already (soil, compost, planters, beds):

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What I need to get or borrow (keep it minimal):

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## Soil type, pH and soil improvements

Knowing your soil type and whether it is acidic, neutral or alkaline will help you choose the right plants for your garden and maintain them in good health.

### Soil type

The mineral constituents of soil are sand, clay and silt. The soil's texture can be described in terms of its proportions of these components, loam containing a mixture of all three. Chalky soils also contain calcium carbonate or lime. Stones in the soil will increase pore spaces, and therefore increase drainage, and stony soils can be drought-prone.

### Texture testing

How does the soil feel between your fingers? Sandy soil has a gritty element - you can feel sand grains within it, and it falls through your fingers. Clay soil has a smearing quality, and is sticky when wet. Pure silt soils are rare, but occur on river flood plains. They have a slightly soapy, slippery texture, and do not clump easily. If soil froths when placed in a jar of vinegar, then it contains free calcium carbonate (chalk) or limestone.

### Characteristics

In the garden, sandy soils are free draining, quick to respond to seasonal changes, and low in water and nutrient reserves. Clay soils drain slowly, holding water well, but this may not be available to plant roots. Clay reacts slowly to temperature changes, staying cold for longer in spring. Silt and chalky soils often behave similarly to sand, although silt has a higher nutrient reserve than chalk.

### Soil pH

The term pH refers to the acidity or alkalinity of your soil. A simple pH-testing kit can be obtained from many garden retailers, which will confirm the acidity or alkalinity of your soil. Acid soils naturally support 'signal' plants such as rhododendrons, azaleas, knapweed and sheep sorrel: these ericaceous plants will not thrive on alkaline soils. Horticulturally, 'neutral' soil is pH6.5 (true neutral is pH7) which many plants enjoy. Extremes below pH5.5 (acid) and above pH7.5 (alkaline) can be problematic, with certain pests, diseases and nutritional disorders becoming more prevalent. Magnesium deficiency and clubroot are more prevalent on acid soils, while trace element deficiencies are common on especially alkaline soils. Indicator weeds for alkaline soils include bladder campion, old man's beard and black henbane.

## Changing pH

Acidifying soil is difficult and expensive. It is best to avoid growing ericaceous plants on alkaline soil; grow them instead in containers of ericaceous John Innes compost. Most plants will survive in acid soil, but garden lime is cheap, and will raise pH effectively where necessary.

## Soil improvement

Any soil type can be productive if handled appropriately. Organic matter improves all soils. Any organic substance - compost, leafmould, well-rotted manure, wood and bark chippings, feathers - will in time turn your basic soil type into a darker, crumbly soil. This is known as the soil structure, and it is under your control. You can dig in organic matter or lay it on top as mulch. Rich organic matter (for example manure) is ideal for dry, 'hungry' soils (such as sand). Dry, fibrous organic matter (such as composted bark) might be better on clay, which is already rich and wet. Whatever you use, it is best applied when well rotted, and added at least twice a year for maximum benefit. Organic matter improves the drainage and workability of clay, and the water- and nutrient-holding capacity of sands, silts and chalky soils.

# COMFREY

Decomposing comfrey supplies extra potassium unavailable to most other plants.

## Use in the garden

The plant's deep roots accumulate potassium from subsoil. Its leaves are high in nitrogen too.

## Make liquid fertiliser

You can make a concentrated liquid containing all of the big 3 nutrients: nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium, in substantial amounts. A high potash feed, it has an N:P:K of about 8:2.6:20.5%.

Place the plant's leaves into a large container, preferably one with a tap or hole at the bottom, and a tight lid at the top to exclude water and flies as well as keep any smell inside. Fill the container with leaves. Cut the leaves before the flower buds appear and before the ageing leaves develop infections such as rust, although rust is common and you might just want to ignore it and include leaves with it on.

A block of wood and a brick could be placed on top of the pile to press it firmly and gently down (without crushing). Fresh comfrey leaves contain more nitrogen than farmyard manure and a black liquid smelling of ammonia will soon collect in the bottom. It is drained off into a screw-topped collecting bottle. The solution needs to be diluted 15 to 20 times with water before application in the garden (giving N:P:K = 0.5:0.4:3.8, a high potash feed).

## Ready made fertiliser

The liquid is a versatile fertiliser, easily stored and transported, and applied to plants by watering or spraying. The nutrients it contains are readily available and it should therefore be applied carefully in small quantities or it will be wasted.

## Feed to tomatoes and pepper plants

While nitrogen stimulates leaf growth, excess potash somewhat stunts growth and coarsens leaves, but it promotes developing flowers and fruit. It is therefore important to apply the liquid fertiliser only after the first flowers have set. Regular feeding may then support better flower and fruit development. The liquid feed is more important for plants grown in pots, rings or containers than for plants in good garden soil.

## Feed plants in containers

Container-grown flowers have a limited food supply, for which there is usually stiff competition. Liquid comfrey is ideal for encouraging flowers. Again it is probably best to delay application until the plants have grown a good set of leaves.

## Correct the nutrient balance

Although the high potassium content in this liquid fertiliser promotes flowers and fruit, it may be considered too high for general use. It can however be adapted by mixing with other garden-made fertilisers.

To make a more evenly balanced fertiliser you could mix 1 part comfrey liquid with about 19 parts worm tea for an estimated N:P:K ratio of 2.5:2.2:2.5%, then dilute. (This assumes that worm tea has the same composition as the worm casts and of course worm casts will vary in composition according to how the worms are fed.)

Experiment: try digging up a comfrey plant to harvest roots as well as leaves; chop up and add to a worm composter. The phosphate composition in the roots may be higher than in leaves. It is likely that the worms will make this phosphate more available (not proved). It's probably best just to mix in some of the chopped roots into the normal feed rather than add a larger amount of the leaves, as the ammonium may be too strong for the worms.

## Feed comfrey to your potatoes

Wilt some of the fresh leaves; use leaves only, as stems may root. Lay these in potato trenches about 2 inches deep to feed your potato plants. The relatively high nitrogen content (C/N ratio = 10) allows it to break down in the soil without risk of removing available nitrogen.

## Mulch your fruit bushes

The potassium in comfrey benefits flowers and fruit, which is good for currants, gooseberries, tomatoes and peppers. Leaves laid on the surface, around the plants, release nutrients for rain and watering to carry down through the soil to the roots.

## Make potting compost

Mix equal parts: chopped comfrey leaves with well decayed autumn leaves, and a little calcified seaweed to increase pH and add growth stimulants. This gives a rich potting compost suitable for transplants, potting etc., but too rich for growing seedlings.

## As garden compost activator

Spread a 2 inch layer of fresh comfrey leaves over the top of a new compost heap, give a sprinkling of water, and cover this with a thin layer of fine soil. The fresh leaves (with C/N ratio = 10) contain more nitrogen than farmyard manure (with C/N ratio = 14). So adding it to compost will quickly get the microbes busy.

## Composting with comfrey

If using it as a substantial component of the compost heap remember to balance this with equal parts brown material like shredded straw or dead leaves to achieve the optimum C/N ratio for bacteria of 25 to 30. Don't add the living roots to compost; kill by drying them out first, otherwise they will spread.

## Cultivating comfrey in the garden

## Feeding your plants

Legumes such as alfalfa take nitrogen from bacteria which in their turn fix nitrogen from the atmosphere. But comfrey, just like brassicas, gets all its nitrogen from the soil. Therefore, to keep the plants and the soil in 'tip top' condition, nitrogen feeding is necessary.

This can be done by mulching with animal manures, and any grass cuttings in excess of composting needs. Alternatively fork in part of a green manure crop such as alfalfa or grow clover (another legume) permanently around your comfrey. If you keep pet animals that use part of the garden as a toilet then encourage them to occasionally use the comfrey patch for droppings which you then cover with soil. Avoid long term application of urine as it increases the salt concentration and reduces worm activity. If you use the plant as a herb or medicine take care not to contaminate anything you will consume.

The trick is to manage comfrey as part of a natural cycle, to turn otherwise lost or unavailable nutrients into an organic plant form. Then to use the plants as a rich organic fertiliser to augment other sources of nutrition and boost fertility. The plant is able to combine nitrogen (that you might waste) and otherwise unavailable or lost potassium in subsoil, into an organic form. For the organic gardener, increasing nutrient-rich organic matter and replacing nutrients lost at harvest time are two important goals.

## Establishing comfrey plants

The ideal site is sunny and over deep soil, but most soils will work except shallow chalky soils. The plant's fleshy black roots grow down deep to the subsoil where they absorb potassium.

For a small to medium sized garden a bed of 4 to 8 plants spaced 2 to 3 ft apart (1 to 2 ft on poor soil) makes a start. When the plants are established sow clover between and leave the cut clover as a mulch. The patch might be conveniently situated near to your compost heap but preferably in a sunny position.

You will find that once established a comfrey plant will be hard to get rid of (see eradication method below). So before you plant it you need to decide on a permanent growing position for a plant that has an expected lifetime in excess of 20 years.

Plants used for garden cultivation are usually taken from the Bocking cultivar of Russian comfrey (*Symphytum x uplandicum*) exported to the USA and Canada in 1954. This plant rarely sets seeds and so it won't infest your garden. Any of the plants offered for sale from seeds are unlikely to be suitable, at least not for the purposes described here. Look for comfrey sold as root cuttings or offsets.

The plant roots or offsets are set out from March to May or in September. Place offsets with growing points just under the surface or roots about 2 inches deep. Keep watered for a few weeks until plants are growing.

## Harvesting comfrey plants

In the first season of a newly established plant cut once in June, prevent flowering and allow the plant to grow and die back so as to build up reserves. Then cut plants before flowering in April when about 2 ft high. Don't cut later than September to allow the plant to recover food reserves before winter dormancy. As plants become strong they will be ready for cutting every 4 or 5 weeks, giving 3 to 5 cuts per season.

## Removing comfrey plants from the garden

The plant can regenerate from pieces of its roots, and these grow deep. Choose dry sunny conditions to dig the whole plant up taking care to remove all roots from the soil. Then persist in cutting down any new growths as soon as they appear until the plant is eradicated. This could take a couple of years depending on how thorough you are.

## Notes and source

N.P.K. stands for the ratio of nitrogen: phosphorus: potassium.

C/N ratio is the ratio of carbon to nitrogen; around 30 is ideal. Dry, brown, or woody matter has more carbon and a higher C/N ratio; sappy, green matter has more nitrogen and a lower C/N ratio.

Source: <http://www.the-organic-gardener.com/Comfrey> (accessed 2.11.09)

## 4) Containers and basic tools

You do not need fancy kit. Use what you have, as long as it drains well.

### Containers I can use

- Seed trays: \_\_\_\_\_
- Recycled pots (with drainage holes): \_\_\_\_\_
- Biodegradable pots: \_\_\_\_\_
- Something else I already have: \_\_\_\_\_

### Basic tools (only the essentials)

- Trowel
- Gloves
- Watering can or spray bottle
- Labels (future me will thank me)

## Microgreens -quick win indoors

Microgreens are the fast, satisfying grow. A small tray on a windowsill can shift your whole mood, because you are harvesting something you grew.

### **What I need**

- Organic seeds lots of veg work; many herbs work too.
- One tray or punnet with holes (for the compost).
- One tray or punnet without holes (to hold water underneath).
- Compost
- Spray bottle.
- Something dark to cover the top (lid, plate, another tray).

### **Step-by-step**

1. Put water in the bottom tray (no holes).
2. Fill the top tray (with holes) with compost.
3. Sprinkle seeds across the surface and spray well.
4. Press down gently so the surface is firm.
5. Cover and keep warm and dark (roughly 18 to 24°C).
6. Check daily and spray if drying out.
7. After 2 to 3 days, you should see germination.
8. Move into bright light once sprouted.
9. Water from below by adding water to the bottom tray.
10. Avoid watering from the top to reduce the risk of fungus.