

Garden Jargon: The Garden Editor's Guide

I've grouped this into plants, tasks and soil. It's aimed at curious beginners. It's far from comprehensive, so if you come across a term you don't understand, please let me know and I'll update the list. Email clairethegardeneditor@gmail.com.

How to Describe Plants



Annual – a plant that germinates from seed, grows, flowers, sets seed and dies within a year. A lot of vegetables like broad beans and peas are annuals.

Biennial – a plant that grows in year one, flowers and sets seed in year 2 and then dies. An example is a foxglove.

Bulbs – think of these as big batteries that you put in the soil or in a container. They include daffodils, tulips and snowdrops. Most of them are perennial and will come back year after year.

Deciduous – something that sheds its leaves, normally in autumn / winter, like an oak tree.

Evergreen – something that keeps its leaves all year round, like holly.

Hardy – plants that can cope with frosts and being outside all year round. This might depend on where you are in the world, so a plant might be hardy in one location but not in another.

Half Hardy – plants that need shelter over winter by being brought inside or sown under glass.

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Herbaceous perennial – a perennial with non-woody stems. This dies back in winter to almost nothing above the soil. But fear not. New stems form and shoot up each year. Dahlias and peonies are examples of herbaceous perennials.

Perennial – a plant with a permanent set of roots which hangs around for more than 2 years. Roses are perennials.

Self-seed – this refers to plants that spews out lots of seeds which then happily establish themselves next to the mother plant. These can be annuals, biennials or perennials.

Tender – plants that can only really cope with warm temperatures, like house plants.

Woody perennial – these don't die back to ground level over winter because their stems are made of woody stuff. Lavenders are woody perennials.

Some Confusing Gardening Tasks



Cutting back – pruning a plant to radically reduce its height. Typically done at the end of a growing season to herbaceous perennials, particularly if they've gone gooey and mushy on top. It can also be done in summer if plants are looking sad and crispy.

Cutting back hard – pruning right down almost to soil level.

Chelsea chop – cutting back plants in late May to get flowers a bit later on in the summer.

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Dead heading – taking dead flowers off living plants. You can do this with your fingers or secateurs. It's often done to encourage more flowers to grow and to stop diseases.

Digging in – this means getting organic matter or fertiliser and using a fork or spade to shovel it into the existing soil up to about a spade's depth. Think of mixing it like cake ingredients. We don't tend to do this too much, as it can destroy the existing soil structure, if it's overworked.

Forking over – lightly fussing the top 10 – 15 cm of soil with any additions in it. Less intensive than digging in.

Grown under glass – a posh way of saying grow this in a greenhouse if you have one. If not, a windowsill with plenty of light and sun will probably do. It gives protection from frost, strong winds and rain.

Hardening off – if you start seeds or plants indoors or “under glass”, hardening off is the process by which they become acclimatised to the outside world. Typically, it involves putting them outside on trays during the day and bringing them in at night. This avoids the plants going into utter shock when they go outside full time. Think of it as a transitional stage like teenagers leaving home.

Lifting – digging a plant up. See this [Editorial Note](#) for how to do it.

Lift and divide – digging a plant up, chopping it into smaller bits, and replanting the bits. A good way of getting more plants for nothing. See this [Editorial Note](#) for a guide.

Pinching out – this does not involve pinching. It's taking off the tip of a plant to stop it growing upwards so quickly and to encourage the plant to send some energy into growing outwards as well. Use your fingers and just nip the top of the plant off.

Potting on – taking a plant out of one pot and putting it into a bigger pot. Normally, you don't go from a teeny tiny pot to a massive new one. Firstly, it's a waste of compost, space and water; but secondly some plants need to feel a bit cocooned with their roots to really thrive.

Pricking out – taking teeny tiny seedlings delicately from a seed bed and putting them into individual little pots. Nothing to do with pricking, as far as I can see.

Pruning – taking bits off a plant. This is a more of an invasive process than dead heading. It's done at different types of the year and in different ways depending on the plant and what you want to happen. Pruning at different times of year can encourage more growth, or more flowers / fruit.

Staking – some plants, like peonies or hydrangeas in their early to teenage years, need support to stop them flopping over. Staking is the act of putting something by the plant to stop it doing this. You can use specialised round metal hoops, willow twigs or things you can make out of string and pieces of wood.

Taking cuttings – cutting a bit off a part of a plant (a leaf, stem or root) and doing things to it to make new plants. Some forms of cuttings are much easier than others and some plants are frankly borderline promiscuous in terms of how easy they are to take to this.

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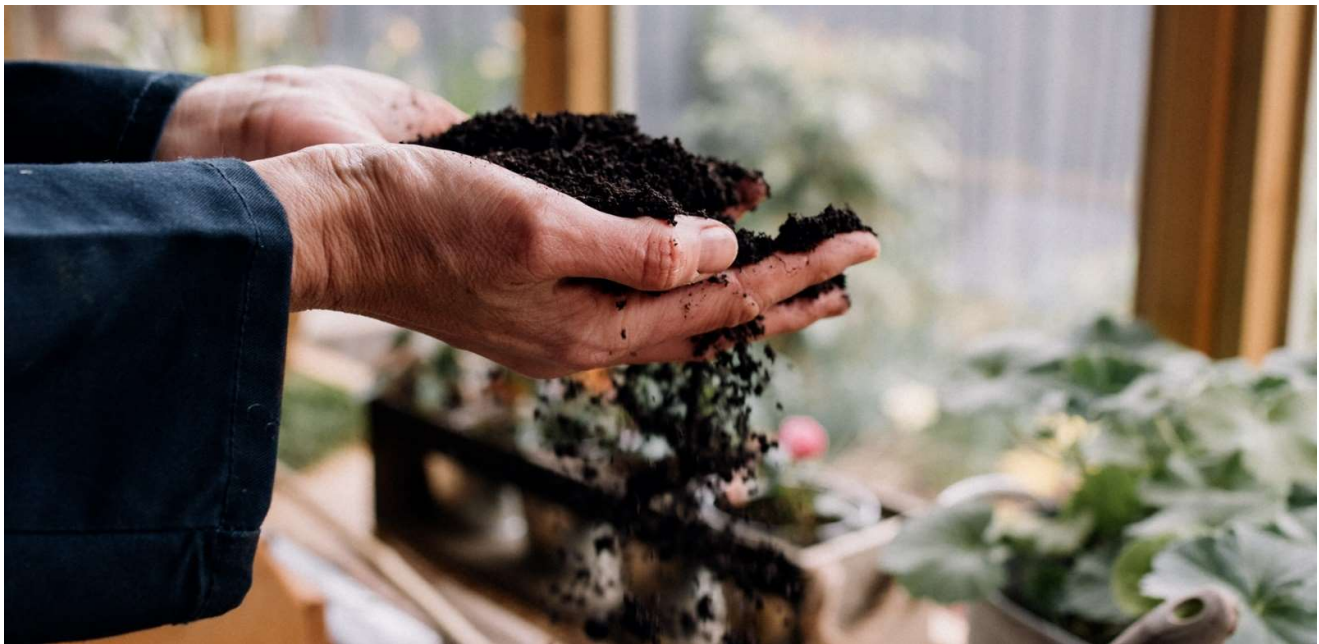
Thinning out – sacrificing some seedlings sown to encourage others to have more space to grow. This feels horrid at first – a bit like the massacre of the innocents. However, you can limit how many seeds you need to “thin out” by sowing fewer at the start. And if you don’t thin out, you might lose all your plants. So it’s a necessary evil.

Thinning – this is different to ‘thinning out’. It means removing branches from shrubs and trees to reduce the density. This is typically done by cutting back a third of the stems hard to the ground.

Top dressing – putting a mulch or organic matter on top of the soil and around existing plants to give them food. Typically, this is not dug in or forked over.

Tying in – this is where a climbing plant needs support to grow upwards. It involves attaching a stem or branch of the plant to a firm surface (a trellis, a post, a bamboo cane for example) with a bit of string, old tights or twine. Plants that need tying in are described as “needing support”. A plant that climbs without support is called “self-climbing”.

Soil Sayings



Soil type – at its very essence, most garden soil tends to be one of three main types; either sandy, clay, or silt. You can tell the difference by getting a handful of moist soil and squeezing it. If it’s super crumbly, it’s likely to be sand. If it sticks in a ball, it’s clay. Silt is relatively rare in gardens but feels soapy when rubbed between your fingers.

In addition, you might have large white lumps of chalk in your soil. This indicates a high chalk content and a more alkaline pH. In practice, most soils involve a mix of silt, clay and chalk.

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Loam – as in “a chalky loam” or a “sandy loam”. In essence, loam means a mixture of different types of soil particle. A well-balanced loam is soil nirvana.

Well-drained or free-draining soil– this means water runs off the soil quickly, so plants that like dry conditions will do well.

Moist soil – the soil keeps hold of moisture, either near the surface or further down in the soil system (leading to the very confusing phrase: moist, but well drained). Plants that like more moisture will thrive.

Mulch – this simply means putting stuff on top of your soil. It could be compost, bark, gravel, straw, etc. You name it, if it's a solid in bits you can pretty much guarantee someone has tried to use it as a mulch. They are used to improve the soil and /or suppress weeds and/or annoy slugs and snails. Mulches, generally, are either organic (compost, bark chippings, leaf mould, straw) or inorganic (slate chippings, even rubber chippings - erugh).

Multi-purpose compost – does what it says on the tin. However, depending on where you get it from – and please I implore you, always get it free from peat – you might find very small plants and seeds struggle if it is quite clumpy and lumpy. To avoid this you can (i) sieve it (ii) buy some peat-free John Innes No 1, or (iii) use home-made leaf mould for seedlings. See this [Editorial Note](#) on how to make leaf compost.

John Innes compost – one of the most cryptic phrases around. It's the horticultural equivalent of Chanel, or Pimm's, with the different numbers referring to different types of compost. “John Innes” means the John Innes Horticultural Institute which came up with different types of compost in the 1930s. Number 1 is generally for seedlings and potting on, because the soil particles are very small which is ideal for tiny roots. Number 2 is for fast growing established but short-lived plants like vegetables. Number 3 has extra added fertiliser and is used to plant larger, well-established plants that are going into their final location for a long time. To be honest, for most domestic purposes, multi-purpose will serve you just as well.

Peat-reduced compost – please, do not buy this. It's classic greenwashing. A lecturer of mine once looked closely at the packaging to see that “peat reduced” meant a reduction in peat content from 67% to.....64%.

Ericaceous compost – Some plants are lime intolerant and need acidic soil to grow. Common examples are rhododendrons, blueberries and camellias. They will need ericaceous compost if you're using a container to grow them.

Organic matter – things that were alive and now are dead that you are going to put in or on your soil. This includes compost, horse manure (which should always be at least 6 months rotted down for techy science reasons), leaf mould, mushroom compost or even straw.

Tilth – the crumbly texture on the top of the soil ready to put your plants or seeds in. Often said in the phrase “rake to a fine tilth”. The smaller the seed you want to plant, the finer the tilth should be.

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