



SEAWEED IN THE GARDEN

Seaweed can be a fantastic resource for fertilising your garden. There are lots of easy ways to use it to increase the health of your soil, as well as your vegies and flowers.

As mentioned previously, seaweed contains many of the elements that are identified on the periodic table, though most of these are only found in trace amounts. It does, however, typically contain useful amounts of iodine, copper, iron, potassium, manganese, phosphorus and zinc. You can use it on your garden as a mulch, add it to your compost or brew it into a seaweed tea (see pages 221–223). Whichever form you use, seaweed is a great soil conditioner that helps to build a healthy soil food web in your garden. In its liquid form, it's also used as a foliar spray for both ornamental and edible gardens.

SEAWEED MULCH

You can use seaweed to mulch around and underneath your plants straight up. It will decompose faster if it is underneath another layer of mulch, or go dry and crinkly and decompose slower if it's on the top.

There are so many benefits of mulching with seaweed.

- ☀ It's an instant organic fertiliser – lay it down, and you're done!
- ☀ It's a great broad-spectrum, slow-release fertiliser for plants.
- ☀ As a dried-out spiky top layer, it's helpful for deterring snails, slugs and some household pets.
- ☀ As a faster-decomposing under layer, it's also great for slug control, as the slugs dislike the small amount of salt.
- ☀ Seaweed is a weed-free mulch – unlike many straw mulches, there are no embedded weed seeds.
- ☀ It doesn't blow away in the wind like some mulches can.
- ☀ It's organic – if it's gathered from clean waters and not near ocean outfalls, your seaweed should be a healthy addition to your garden.
- ☀ In sandy soils, the alginates in the seaweed (particularly bladder wracks) can really help as an additional wetting agent.



ABOVE: Foraged seaweed used as top-mulch (you can tuck it under existing mulch, too).

OPPOSITE: As it's weed-seed-free (land weeds, that is), seaweed makes a great and versatile mulch for gardens that breaks down slowly.





SEAWEED FERTILISER TEA

Home-made seaweed tea is a great addition to any garden. It's packed with plant-friendly nutrients. We love it because it can be made seasonally when the seaweed shows up, and then used throughout the year.

Seaweed tea is great for starting strong seedlings, as it contains some natural hormones that aid plant growth. We use it frequently as the liquid in our seedling mixes, as well as in seed balls. It's known for producing resilient vegetables (it's a huge help against marginal frosts), as well as improving their transport and shelf-life. You can also use it as a foliar spray for plant leaves. It can be a helpful anti-fungicide against powdery mildew and some other fungal diseases. As we all know, super-healthy plants mean fewer pest problems, longer fruiting periods and general garden goodness.

You can make a single-ingredient seaweed tea or combine it, as we do, with other nutrient- and mineral-packed plants for an all-round liquid fertiliser. We add comfrey and borage for extra potassium, nitrogen and phosphorus, as well as nettle for extra nitrogen and trace minerals. With or without the extra ingredients, the process is basically the same.

CAUTION!

Handling seaweed tea, especially during the anaerobic stage, may not be a good idea if you're immuno-compromised or pregnant. And, as with any natural brew, use common sense and high-quality ingredients. If it smells bad at the end of brewing (when it should smell great), discard it.

OPPOSITE: Borage is a fast-growing, mineral-rich dynamic accumulator. It makes a perfect addition to your seaweed fertiliser tea.

BELOW: Seaweed fertiliser ingredients: seaweed, comfrey, nettle and borage.





SEAWEED TEA WITH COMFREY, BORAGE AND NETTLE

You will need:

- ☀ A bucket or barrel with a lid
- ☀ As much seaweed as will fit in your bucket
- ☀ Comfrey, borage and nettle leaves
- ☀ Unchlorinated water (rainwater is great – go and catch some!)
- ☀ A stick for stirring
- ☀ A shady spot to stash your bucket while the tea is brewing

1. Fill your bucket with lightly washed seaweed, add your herbs and other leaves and then fill it to the top with unchlorinated water. Place the bucket somewhere out of the sun (maybe not next to the front door, as it will smell bad at certain stages of brewing) with the lid on lightly, but not tight.

2. Stir the brew with your stick each day for a week or so if you remember. Then wait for about 3 months. During this time, the tea mix will start off aerobic, which smells fine, then it will slowly turn anaerobic, which is the stinky stage. Fear not – leave it alone.

3. After a few months or so (the timing depends a lot on your ambient temperature – it will progress faster in summer than in winter), the anaerobic stage will give way to a second aerobic stage (as more good bacteria have moved in), at which point your seaweed tea will smell good again. And now it's ready to use!

4. Dilute your concentrated seaweed tea 1 part tea to 10 parts water, and apply it weekly to plants or seedlings.

BREWING TIPS

The recipe can be scaled down to a small bucket, or up to a 100 litre (26 gallon) barrel. The size of your brew is only limited by the ingredients you can source and the size of your vessel.

If you can get your hands on unchlorinated water for this tea, you should get a better result as the water will be more able to support microbiology, which you want to encourage. So rainwater or filtered water is best, if you can manage it. If that's not possible, fill some buckets with chlorinated water and leave them out in the open for 24 hours. Most of the chlorine will evaporate during this time.

Once the tea is brewed, you'll probably find that most (if not all) of the seaweed and leaves have broken down entirely, or there may be some sludge at the top or bottom of your bucket. While this sludge is like liquid gold, it's best put in your compost pile rather than straight onto your plants, as its concentrated goodness might be a bit much for them. You can pour the liquid off into another vessel from the sludge for applying to plants, or leave it in the same vessel – it's up to you.

You can aerate the seaweed tea throughout the brewing process with a small aquarium oxygenator or a compost tea brewer. This will dramatically shorten the brewing time and cut out the stinky stage, but obviously it requires more energy input.

You can also add microbial inoculants to your seaweed tea to increase microbial activity and speed up the process, as well as possibly enhancing the result – these can be found at some garden stores or online.

If you live somewhere where seaweed harvesting is not possible, you can buy dried kelp from most rural supplies stores, where it's sold as an animal feed supplement. It will work just fine in the seaweed tea.