

# Guide for retailers: ranging quality growing media

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## Introduction



As peat free and peat-reduced growing media for amateur gardeners become the norm, the quality of the growing media they use will play a huge part in gardeners' success, satisfaction, and long-term retention. Growing media manufacturers are continually innovating and investing in their products to ensure this, however success for the UK's 30 million gardeners depends on collaboration through the supply chain.

**This short guide for retailers is aimed especially at those responsible for ranging decisions for growing media, as well as those responsible for advising, informing or reassuring shoppers about the quality of growing media on sale.**

## Areas to discuss with growing media manufacturers

Not all growing media are equal. Increasingly they incorporate different ingredients, and of course are designed for different purposes. The best manufacturers invest time, finance, and expertise in developing products that deliver the best results for consumers, and will be more than happy to provide information on the work they're doing in this respect. However, in such a technically challenging area, it can sometimes be difficult to know where to start when assuring yourself of the quality of a growing media. This set of three broad question areas has been developed with manufacturers and retailers, and aims to give you a starting point in assuring yourself as to the likely quality of a product.





# What approaches are in place to ensure that a growing media product is effective and reliably supports good plant growth?

The best manufacturers of growing media invest significantly in developing high quality products, as well as in trialling and testing the performance of their products. Without robust quality assurance, the risk of a poor customer experience increases along with the risk that that gardener gives up on gardening. In spite of commercial sensitivities, there are ways of working with manufacturers to understand and assure yourself that ranges you are considering stocking are likely to provide an excellent customer experience.

A manufacturer should be able to provide you with a written definition of quality that they use in the business for their products, and should have a formal quality management system in place such as ISO9001 and ISO14001. At the very least, manufacturers should be able to provide written details of their quality management process, and in some cases may be members of third-party audited quality assurance schemes such as those run by RHP ([www.rhp.nl/en/tuinbouw](http://www.rhp.nl/en/tuinbouw)) or OHAS ([www.hta.org.uk/ohas](http://www.hta.org.uk/ohas)).

We would expect a manufacturer to be willing to share evidence of the results of growing trials they have conducted to test the effectiveness of their product. A useful assurance manufacturers should be able to provide for multi-purpose composts is the results of trials conducted and independently assessed against the P7 growing trial methodology<sup>1</sup>. This sets out a standard method that is specific for horticulture for assessing the performance of a product in terms of its effectiveness in supporting healthy plant growth. This methodology is specified as a requirement in schemes such as the Responsible Sourcing Scheme for Growing Media (RSS) and OHAS.

Clearly achieving and specifying a product formulation that works at trial is one important step, however ensuring reliability and consistency of product is also critical. We would expect a manufacturer to be able to show that it is testing each product batch against its specification, and that this should include at least the pH, electrical conductivity, and moisture content of each batch as well as the inclusion of fertilisers. Part of this testing may be performed in laboratories; where this is the case manufacturers would normally be working with laboratories accredited to Good Laboratory Practice (GLP) standards.

<sup>1</sup> Further information on the trial methodology is available from <http://www.responsiblesourcing.org.uk/p7-protocol> [www.responsiblesourcing.org.uk/p7-protocol](http://www.responsiblesourcing.org.uk/p7-protocol)

## What measures in the manufacturing process are in place to ensure the product is safe, and that risks of contamination with pathogens such as legionella are mitigated?

In the worst case there is the potential for risks to human health associated with growing media if the manufacturing process does not have adequate controls, for instance to eliminate potentially dangerous bacteria, or foreign bodies such as glass. Reputable manufacturers will have formal, documented manufacturing and management processes in place to control these sorts of risks, most likely as part of a documented quality management system. We would recommend that retailers discuss this area with their suppliers, and how they are ensuring compliance with relevant legislation such as the General Product Safety Regulations 2005 for Great Britain and (for product supplied to Northern Ireland) the EU Regulation on General Product Safety (2023/988).

When considering growing media suppliers or ranging, it is well worth asking about what analysis of potential hazards to human health is undertaken by the manufacturer, and what control points are in place in the manufacturing process to address them. A manufacturer should be able to provide a documented process for identifying potential hazards, and having control points in the manufacturing process at which each potential hazard can be either prevented, eliminated, or reduced to acceptable levels. This may follow the principles of Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point (HACCP) approach to managing product safety, which originated in food production<sup>2</sup>.



We would expect a hazard analysis for a growing media or similar product such as a soil improver to include (but not necessarily be limited to):

- Sourcing only materials which have been assured as meeting quality and safety standards
- Controls for bacterial contamination such as legionella, salmonella or e-coli
- Controls against the inclusion of glass or sharp materials in the product.

HACCP is only one possible approach to managing product safety, but all manufacturers should be able to demonstrate formal processes for the control of product safety hazards.

A manufacturer should also be able to provide you with written information on what process is in place in the event that a product had to be recalled on the grounds of safety. These types of process may be included in part of a wider quality management system or certification the business uses. On-pack consumer labelling also has a part to play; we would suggest asking a manufacturer for information on what information is provided on pack for the consumer to support safe handling and use of the product.

<sup>2</sup> Further information on the seven principles of HACCP is available online, for instance: <https://myhaccp.food.gov.uk/help/guidance/introduction-haccp-principles>

### What on-pack information and language is used to manage effectively consumers' expectations and appropriate use of the product?

We estimate that over 85% of growing media retailed to the consumer comprises product labelled as all-purpose or multi-purpose compost. Consumer awareness and knowledge of the term 'growing media' is low, as is knowledge of the distinction between it and a 'true' compost, soil improver or even mulch. Suffice to say, if a product has the word 'compost' on it, it's likely that many consumers will expect to be able to grow plants in it. If a consumer buys a soil improver and tries to grow plants in containers filled with it, it's almost certain they'll get a poor experience. Indeed, specialist growing media, such as those for ericaceous or different types of plants, will often give the gardener better results, and when displayed close at hand to those types of plants can drive link sales.

When making ranging decisions, we suggest that you assess whether or not the product labelling and packaging is likely to help the consumer choose and use the right product for the right purpose, and indeed support link-selling.

This might include ensuring that use of the word 'compost' is only used on products that are designed to work as a growing media (or if not, that suitably clear instruction or information is on pack), and that soil improvers, mulches, or top-soils are clearly labelled as such. Further information on the intended use of a product on pack can also be helpful, for instance information that informs consumers on whether a growing media is specifically designed for different types of plants or growth stages. Indeed, this can go further in supporting consumer success, for instance by including usage instructions, or advice on effective watering or feeding (which support valuable cross-selling opportunities as well as customer success).



## Further Information

We hope you have found this short guide useful. Significant work is ongoing across the industry to assure and drive up quality standards and certifications for growing media. Naturally this guide cannot provide the same level of quality assurance as this ongoing work, but nonetheless we hope it has provided a useful starting point for retailers looking to assure the quality of product they stock. Ranging high-quality growing media is a vital ingredient to ensuring that gardeners succeed with the plants and products they take home from retailers.

This is one of a series of guides and information available from the HTA and the Garden Centre Association (GCA) to help plant retailers get the most out of plant retailing; you can find other resources and materials as follows on [hta.org.uk/plant-retail-success](https://hta.org.uk/plant-retail-success)

RESOURCE	SUMMARY
Retailing peat-free growing media elearning	Five elearning courses have been produced with the GCA covering: what Peatlands are and why they're important; The Responsible Sourcing Scheme for growing media; helping shoppers choose the right growing media for the right purpose; reassuring peat users about peat-reduced and peat free alternatives; understanding main ingredients used as peat alternatives. The courses are designed for retail staff who work with shoppers in the plant area.
Information videos on caring for plants grown in peat-free	Videos produced by the GCA and RHS to help either retail staff or the general public succeed with plants grown in peat-free growing media
Guide for retailers: ranging quality growing media	A short written guide for retail buyers on how to work with manufacturers when ranging growing media products
Using Garden Plant Protection Products Safely elearning	A course jointly produced by the HTA and CropLife to provide retail staff with the knowledge needed to provide information to consumers, as is required by the Sustainable Use Directive.
Caring for plants grown in peat-free and peat-reduced mixes	This guide for staff in retail plant areas has been prepared with commercial growers, and shares tips and advice on ensuring plants grown in peat-free or peat-reduced mixes thrive and stay healthy and saleable.
Guide to maximising link sales from plants	This guide is based on real-life merchandising examples and statistical analysis of over 7 million garden centre transactions. It provides common-sense insights into ways of maximising profit and customer success from each transaction.
Shopper eye-tracking research	This research uses eye-tracking technology to see the plant area as the shopper sees it. It contains ten key insights, illustrated with video footage, which help improve merchandising effectiveness in the plant area, as other zones in the garden centre.