



GROWING MEDIA
association

Committed to Peat Reduction

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Growing Media Association • The Horticultural Trades Association
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1 Introduction

The Growing Media Association (GMA) represents the majority of UK and some Irish suppliers of growing media into the UK horticultural market. The GMA is committed to environmental responsibility and to reducing the usage of peat for environmental reasons. According to Government data, horticultural peat use makes up 1/2 a million tonnes of the 536 million tonnes (1/1000th) of the annual CO2 emissions that the



UK needs to cut to meet its 2050 climate change target. The GMA accepts that reducing peat use will make a small contribution to cutting emissions and that peatland habitats and wildlife are affected by peat extraction.

2 GMA Commitment to Peat Reduction

Members of the GMA cover the whole spectrum of growing media suppliers from businesses that started out as peat producers to those that run entirely peat-free operations. Without exception, all those members that started out as peat producers have worked hard to reduce peat content and new peat-free



companies have developed product that performs exceptionally well. To compete with peat it has had to be good. Phenomenal progress has been achieved across the sector.

Against the background of a gardening public that has resisted change the industry has:

- Invested over £100 million in researching, developing and bringing to market alternative products.
- Initiated the Growing Media Initiative (GMI) which has brought together all stakeholders including retailers, NGOs, Defra and manufacturers. Retailers and manufacturers can join the GMI when they are committed to peat reduction and can demonstrate to third-party inspectors significant year-on-year reductions. The GMI sets challenging goals for its members, enables proactive businesses to differentiate themselves in the market place, rewards progress and remains the only mechanism that exists to genuinely speed the process of peat reduction.
- Demonstrated innovation and ingenuity in discovering and developing alternative materials. Many possible alternatives have failed to make the exacting standard that horticultural growing media demands. Success stories that are providing the answers for the future are based on products like coir, wood fibre, bark and green compost (see Appendix II). Alternative products go through extensive development and trialling before being released onto the market. Lessons have been learnt from the early days of peat alternatives and today's products meet the quality standards that discerning consumers have come to expect. To ensure quality is never compromised many manufacturers are phasing in alternative products with almost all growing media products now peat-reduced - some with less than 50% peat.
- Ensured that when peat is used it is not harvested from protected conservation areas.
- Ensured that peatlands are restored after extraction has ceased.

3 Government Peat Reduction Targets

The industry was pleased to have achieved the Government target to reduce the use of growing media and soil improvers by 40% by 2005. The target of 90% reduction by 2010 was always viewed as unrealistic by the industry but, as a result of significant investment and commitment to peat reduction, considerable further progress has been made.

The GMA welcomes the new proposed Government target for amateur growing media products to be peat-free by 2020. Whilst a very challenging target the industry believes, with the right support from Government, it can be achieved. The GMA believe that the Government are right to more carefully consider the approach for commercial plant production where issues of quality and price become more acute in what is a highly competitive international market.

4 Meeting the Targets

The industry will continue to invest its own resources to do its part in turning the amateur growing media market peat-free. The challenges that the industry has faced in reducing peat up to 2010 will continue towards 2020 so GMA members are looking forward to working with Government to help overcome these barriers:

- Further evidence is required to demonstrate the availability of alternative products of the right quality and consistency. Most alternatives are by-products from other industrial processes and their availability depends on the success, or otherwise, of their core markets.
- Further evidence is required to demonstrate the environmental credentials of alternative products to ensure peat replacement brings about genuine and worthwhile environmental benefits.
- Consumer demand for peat-free and peat reduced products needs to be stimulated as these tend to be more expensive than peat-based mixes.
- To prevent the market simply switching to imported peat-based mixes efforts will need to be made to move towards a level European playing field on peat reduction.

- Further Government-funded research is required to identify further alternatives, improve existing options and develop cultural recommendations.



5 GMA Action Plan

The GMA will remain at the forefront of industry activity to reduce peat and will further stimulate this activity, to meet the 2020 target, by:

- Further investing in the development and promotion of the Growing Media Initiative as the primary mechanism for driving the supply chain towards reaching the target
- Supporting the Government *Act on CO₂* campaign and further educating the gardening public
- Labelling bags to show peat content
- Providing advice, support and display materials to retailers to improve their knowledge of peat alternatives, how to manage them differently and how to advise customers
- Close liaison with Defra to address the barriers identified above
- Investing, through its members, in the development, testing and commercial introduction of alternative substrates
- Annually monitoring progress towards the target.

Appendix I - Types of peatland

In the UK the two main types of peatland are the lowland 'raised bogs' (for example those in northern England) and the upland 'blanket bogs' (mostly in Scotland). The upland blanket peat bogs make up over 90% of the total peat bogs in the UK. Both types of peatland support a specialised range of species adapted to low pH and low nutrient levels and they are therefore included in the UK Government Biodiversity Action Plan. Raised bogs occur in areas where rainfall accumulates and decaying plants such as



sphagnum mosses retain large amounts of water due to their spongy nature, forming a dome of peat over time.



Peat formation is a very slow process at an average of not more than 1mm per year. Historically peat bogs have been hand cut for peat fuel for many years but not at a rate that stopped them being active. It is recognised that extraction of peat, either for fuel or for horticultural purposes, depletes the peat much faster than it can be formed. Once a peat bog has been drained however it no longer functions in the same way and therefore biodiversity is affected even before the peat is extracted. Of an original area of around 70,000 hectares of raised bog in the UK only 6% is described as 'near natural'. Around 4,000 ha of the total area currently have consent for peat extraction.

Around 10% of UK lowland raised bogs are designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) or Areas of Special Scientific Interest (ASSI)



in Northern Ireland; others are National Nature Reserves (NNRs). Planning permission to extract peat for most sites originated in the 1940s before the ecological importance of peat bogs was fully recognised. As these planning permissions pre-date the above designations, operating companies with extraction rights will suffer financial losses if these are rescinded. In 1995 the UK government introduced a target for 40% of growing media and soil improvers to be non-peat by 2005 in the Mineral Planning Guidance Note 13 (MPG13, 2005). The Government raised this to 90% peat replacement by 2010 in the UK Biodiversity Action Plan in 1999.

All pictures on this page show peat bog restored after extraction

Appendix II - Industry investment in peat reduction

A recent Defra project (project SPO577, 2009) has shown that the UK horticultural industry (manufacturers of growing media, commercial growers and retailers) have invested in the region of £100 million in peat reduction since 1999 (and there was considerable spend prior to 1999). The largest amount of this was investment by GMA members.

Case Study 1: Woodfibre as peat replacement

Westland Horticulture, a GMA member, has invested over £3m in machinery to produce a wood fibre product from spruce wood chips. In the long term, to guarantee supply of wood chip, the company will probably also have to invest in the purchase of forests to replace its peat bogs.



Peat harvesting with a spruce plantation in the background

Case Study 2: Green compost (White Moss)

Over the past five years GMA member White Moss Horticulture has invested more than £3 million in developing their Simonswood site in the North West of England into the country's largest producer of green compost solely dedicated to the manufacture of growing media.



Compost processing

The site is a model of co-production, having local supplies of green waste and wood products as well as peat with the processing, blending and bagging of these products being carried out on the same site. They now use around 80% of alternatives, and are full members of the GMI, all of which means that the company's carbon footprint is kept to a minimum and the impact on the environment is extremely small.



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