Life beyond peat use- Stakeholder Briefing

HTA
The Horticultural Trades Association

HTA position paper – April 2024

Industry's significant progress in reducing peat use:

The environmental horticulture sector has been working towards the sustainable transition towards peat-free plant production. Industry figures are now at an historic low for the use of peat and industry has made great progress, with the peat content in bags of growing media sold at retail below 17% in 2022 and projected to be close to zero by the end of 2024. Bagged retail growing media accounted for 70% of the peat sold in the UK in 2022 - meaning a significant reduction in overall peat-use will be achieved. The sector has also launched a Responsible Sourcing certification Scheme to publicly score its products for environmental impact. Furthermore, the HTA holds regular peat-free growing workshops to support and knowledge share best practices with our members. HTA members are at the forefront of peat-free growing media trials, one in partnership with the RHS and funded by Defra, is having a positive impact on the transition, however, it is not due to end until October 2027 (after a proposed ban deadline) and therefore key data will not be utilised in the law-making.

Sector		2020	2021	2022
Amateur	Peat Volume ('000 m^3)	1,521	1,020	471
	Peat as a % of total volume	35.5%	29.8%	16.8%
Prof.	Peat Volume ('000 m^3)	721	628	456
	Peat as a % of total volume	62.3%	51.7%	43.3%
Total	Peat Volume ('000 m^3)	2,292	1,691	950
	Peat as a % of total volume	41.0%	35.5%	24.0%

Support from Defra/Sasa essential for horticulture businesses to go 100% peat-free:

With an intended ban on peat for horticulture use, businesses are having to invest heavily in building new supply-chains, upgrading machinery, trialling production in peat-free media, fine tuning production cycles, as well as developing new irrigation and feeding regimes to transition to a fully peat-free future. This is by no means an overnight or easy process. To make a step change within the transition, horticulture businesses would benefit from financial support from Government to expand peat-free trials, invest in machinery to handle and produce peat-alternatives such as wood-fibre, and to trial new supply chains with newer, sustainable, and locally sourced materials such as (but not exclusively) sphagnum moss, bracken, and garden/kitchen waste.

Challenges to overcome:

Ultimately there is no like-for-like material that is at the same quality as peat for use in growing media in terms of physical structure, chemical and biological make up and with its moisture and nutrient retention properties, as well as its all-round performance producing a wide range of crops. It is a huge undertaking to change a system that has been developed over many decades to produce £1.6b of plants and trees needed to supply Britain's 30 million gardeners and to green our cities to help adapt to climate change.

Successfully becoming 100% peat-free is a real challenge to produce the same range of plants and trees at the quality and scale needed to meet both market demand and environmental targets.

The HTA believes an initial focus should be placed on bagged growing media for amateur gardeners, as evidence proves that an intended 2026 ban for professionally tree and plant growers comes too soon and puts at risk up to 100 million UK plants being produced.

Peat-free mix blends are 'biologically active', so physical quantities in pots can decrease over time, pHs can drift, individual nutrient levels such as nitrogen can rapidly fall, and calcium and magnesium levels – especially in small production units - can become sub-optimal.

Irrigation water which has a high alkalinity (hard water) will have more impact on pH (but will supply calcium), and applications of concentrated liquid feeds can increase EC levels.

Moreover, there is likely to be an increase in the build-up of potassium levels from coir and green waste ingredients, which will impact the availability of calcium and magnesium, and sulphates from fertilisers, which will increase growing media EC levels.

Working together: equipment, technology or infrastructure required to support a peat-free future industry

The vast majority of UK growers are SMEs who do not have the capital, resource, time or space to conduct large-scale peat-free growing media trials. We ask the Government to open grant funding to our growers to be able to properly invest in this complex process. A list of what is required is below:

- Precision irrigation, overhead or sub, to replace older systems not accurate to supply water uniformly enough for new peat-free growing media blends.
- Boom irrigation systems for accurate water application over crops grown under protection.
- Mobile benching with flood floors for certain crops.
- Irrigation control units to facilitate different irrigation regimes on nurseries.
- Hand-held and in-crop water, pH, temperature monitoring equipment (including wireless connections).
- Precision liquid feeding application equipment.
- Potting machines (older ones often struggle with some of the peat-free growing media ingredients).
- Bale breakers for handling new growing media blends.
- Fertiliser dibbling equipment for potting machines.
- Drones/mini drones for assessment of outdoor and indoor crops/growing media by colour and temperature, to aid scouting for nutrient issues/pest and disease issues/irrigation issues.
- Cameras (boom mounted) for crop scanning to detect water induced plant stress.
- Dehumidification units for glasshouses to counterbalance the additional water applications and maintain disease control.

Defra changes the date on ban – impossible for many UK growers:

The date for a proposed ban is the key factor in achieving a sustainable and robust peat-free industry. The Government's original ambition was for England to be peat free by 2030. Although challenging, this date was accepted by the HTA as creating the time to have a workable transition away from peat. This is why Defra's indication that a ban for professional plant and tree growers will come into effect four years earlier, at the end of 2026, even with (limited and unconfirmed) phased exemptions, has caused widespread concern and alarm amongst professional users and growers.

Regrettably, the 2026 date comes without any assessment of the impact on UK horticultural growers and businesses. The report recently published by the Office for the Internal Market and the Impact Assessment, undertaken by Defra for the 2021 Consultation, were both based on 2028 with exemptions beyond, being the earliest potential end date for peat use in professional horticulture. The Government's own response to the consultation in August 2022 stated, "the professional horticulture sector faces additional technical barriers that will take longer to overcome". The sector was, and is still, working towards a 2030 deadline.

Damaging impact on trees, plants, business, jobs, carbon and imports

The HTA estimates that the difference between the announced 2026 date and Defra's impact assessment's focus on a 2028 date seriously jeopardises 85% of the UK's plant and tree production, and, with imports subject to the same requirements, the ban also poses a significant threat to the UK Government's tree planting and urban greening ambitions.

It also risks permanently reducing the nation's capacity to produce plants and trees as businesses fail or exit the market. As a result of the 2026 ban, the HTA envisages many SME and family businesses in our sector no longer being commercially viable.

In addition, there is a risk that being forced to use inferior peat-free alternatives will reduce both the quality and the shelf-life of many plants and lead to significant wastage increases.

Over 85% of our houseplants are imported. Furthermore, with non-alignment outside of the UK on peat use, there will be a drastic decrease in UK production, leading to a catastrophic reduction in choice to British gardeners, a reduction in biodiversity and the ability of the landscape industry to fulfil contracts for planting our green spaces.

278k tonnes of CO2e would be saved by bringing the ban on peat use forward to 2026 from 2030, roughly equivalent to the carbon dioxide absorbed by half a million trees or 11. million small shrubs over their lifetimes. But bringing the ban forward to 2026 will likely result in 100 million fewer plants and trees per year being supplied from 2027, resulting in the loss of all of the environmental and health benefits these plants and trees bring.

There are 3 million hectares of peatland in the UK, and an estimated 2,214 hectares or only 0.07% is extracted for horticulture. [Source: Centre for Ecology & Hydrology]

Scottish Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands Mairi Gougeon MSP wrote to Defra Secretary of State Rt Hon Steve Barclay MP explaining:

"DEFRA has set a date of 2026 for banning the sale of peat for professional horticulture. Regrettably, this is in advance of the Scottish Government's intention to ban the sale of horticultural peat and, because of the interlinked nature of supply chains, is likely to impact the Scottish horticulture industry. We are aware that this has caused significant alarm and concern among Scottish and UK growers of plants and trees and will be almost impossible for them to comply with. It would be helpful to remove this arbitrary date to enable discussion to arrive at an agreement with the horticulture industry and across all nations on a date that gives the industry sufficient time to transition."

Our asks from Policy Makers to support the sustainable transition from peat use in horticulture:

• To provide urgent grant funding for our equipment, technology, and infrastructure list.

• To deliver on a 2030 professional ban by: Providing a review and full impact assessment of the '2026' professional ban date intention.
Confirming professional 2030 date with exemptions, allowing enough time for trials to optimise peat-free mixes for all plant species and varieties.

• To ensure clarity on the delivery of an end-2024 ban on the retail of sale of peat for amateur use (i.e. all bagged growing media to be peat-free) and recognise that retail sale and professional use are different.

• To ensure the transition away from peat keeps Britain's horticulture and gardening industry globally competitive and, on a level, playing field with other horticultural markets and reflects the reality of our sector as one with significant global trading relationships in plants and plant products.

• To allow an exemption larger than the proposed 150ml for propagation. There is no one size fits all volume for every plant. This 150ml is designed for salad and vegetable growers – not for plants, where an average propagation is usually over 300ml.

• To urgently communicate a timetable and detail on how the bans will work, including definitions of professional use, enforcement etc. There remain hugely significant unanswered questions, such as for professional landscapers.

• To work with European counterparts to minimise the risk of price inflation that shortages in stock combined with the increased cost of alternative growing media may cause.

• Help to facilitate knowledge exchange of expertise in peat-free growing.

The challenges of growing peat-free plants (front row peat-free vs back row, same species in growing media containing peat):