

## Supporting a peat-free transition in UK horticulture Policy Paper – September 2025

The purpose of this paper is to set-out the requirements and considerations to deliver a supported just-transition to peat-free that enables a successful and sustainable future.

### Position summary & key policy asks

- The Horticultural Trades Association (HTA) fully supports a peat-free future for horticulture.
- The sector has made huge investment, innovation and progress in reducing peat-use. This has been done through collaboration across the sector, and without significant government financial support or regulation. It should be celebrated and recognised. Furthermore, it has been delivered in an extremely challenging business climate, with huge input cost increases, resource issues and pressure – from energy to skills to borders to water – hitting businesses hard, most of which are SMEs. Many businesses report unprecedented cost pressures. Professional growers and plant producers report peat-free growing media is costing up to 37% more and some supply challenges given the scale and consistent quality required – managing such a cost hit and shift cannot happen overnight and requires customers, suppliers and the market to be ready. There are environmental and economic risks of delivering a policy that does not support UK horticulture to flourish. The government should share the sector’s ambition as a driver of green growth and jobs.
- It is vital that progress is measured through independent, comparable, transparent and accurate data in order to highlight areas where further support is needed and to ensure the industry is fairly represented and treated in future policy announcements.
- Success is best achieved through professional, expert, and constructive collaboration and consultation with those most impacted by policies. Successful collaboration of stakeholders on, for example, trials and consumer communication, should be welcomed. Divisive approaches, communications and campaigns detract focus from the shared ambition for a peat-free future for the UK. As the leading trade association for environmental horticulture, the HTA is committed to playing a positive and key role in achieving a peat-free, sustainable and thriving future for its members and the sector.
- Quality and consistency is key and we need to support reliable crop production and good results for gardeners too. There have been crop failures and performance challenges – whether commercial scale or domestic these come with cost and reputational risk for all. We further note that ‘peat-free’ is not homogenous, and all materials have some environmental, carbon and sustainability impacts. We recognise sustained industry achievement in measuring and reducing the environmental and social impacts of growing media, such as the Responsible Sourcing Scheme (RSS). Any barriers to sustainable alternatives must be understood and unlocked – for example – on waste management.
- **A level-playing field is critical, with imported plants treated equally** – this will require early, supportive and proactive engagement with key supply markets, and clarity on the legal basis, how this will be monitored and enforced.

- **Certainty over the future of UK peat-free policy is needed, and the HTA calls for clear guidance from government and their creation of a balanced, expert group to create, establish and implement a roadmap supported by government and industry with workstreams focused on key issues, such as quality.**
- The HTA acknowledges the great successes, but also challenges to achieving peat-free, and that environmental horticulture businesses are very diverse in what they do, how they do and in different positions in their ability to achieve a cost-effective, productive peat-free business.
- The most important outcome is that a successful transition to peat-free can be achieved. There are a range of views from HTA member businesses on dates for when peat-free can, if at all, be achieved. Regardless of when, to achieve peat-free requires support and key conditions.

Ending the sale of peat-based growing media for **amateur** use should be achievable for the vast majority by end-2028, provided that:

- there is a minimum 12-months from time of legislation to enactment to allow existing stocks to be sold-through and reduces the risk of unsustainable consequences such as packaging waste.
- that there are enough suitable, quality, alternative growing media ingredients available through the supply chain to meet demand (quantification requires further discussion).
- We note that some may be able to achieve before 2028 and for others there are different challenges which may extend this and need to be considered.

A 2030 end to **professional** peat-use (for example, commercial growing) should be achievable, provided that:

- Exemptions can be applied for or be agreed, dependent on factors that are to be agreed with expert industry input and could include, for example, crop success and availability of alternatives, or plants with a longer growing lead-time to bridge any end-date.

For **both** professional and amateur:

- Regulation always presents cost and administrative burdens, which has a greater impact on SMEs. As a matter of principle, it should be last resort, simple, workable and without unintended consequences.
- Businesses are at all stages of the peat-free journey and with the right conditions and support the vast majority of businesses and the market will be able to achieve peat-free. Given the challenge, it is critical that all businesses can be supported and all businesses are able to thrive and be part of a flourishing sector.
- Legislation must include lead-times for implementation, periodic reviews and a 'back-stop' mechanism for unforeseen peat-free supply-chain disruption, market disruption or issues. A renewed and comprehensive economic and environmental impact assessment of the policy will be essential.

- Government must actively work with growing media manufacturers to provide support for investment and greater productivity, for example, planning and regulatory barriers, such as waste-water treatment or accelerating national grid connections. Support must be available to those already investing or that have invested in a transition to peat-free.
- The value and importance of UK environmental horticulture and this being the sector's 'transition to zero' must be recognised. The government should support an enhanced scheme of R&D grants, the ADOPT programme (part of the Farming Innovation Programme in England) and the Farming Equipment and Technology Fund is accessible to the sector and key organisations and aligned policy dates, and such support should apply across the UK's 4 nations. The HTA is working with the RHS on the peat-free fellowship and delivering its own technical support programme for UK growers.
- Public or consumer education on ensuring peat-free success 'at-home' is necessary to sustain growth in UK gardeners and reduce risk of individuals failing and being deterred from gardening. Engagement is best delivered through a collaborative approach with key partners and experts and has the opportunity to be further backed by government communications.

### **Introduction to the issue and the sector**

The Horticultural Trades Association (HTA) is committed to supporting its members in transitioning to a peat-free future through a sustainable process that ensures businesses—and the wider industry— are competitive to invest and grow. This paper follows consultation with HTA members, who are diverse and varied in their peat-free journey, challenges, successes and operating context. A 'too-soon' ban or ill-designed regulations, could significantly hinder the UK's ability to produce trees and plants at the required quality and quantity, and directly impacted UK gardeners, shared green spaces and delivery of UK environmental targets. Support and constructive collaboration by all partners, to ensure the sector can take the final and most challenging steps toward going peat-free is essential.

The HTA represents around 1400 UK businesses, over 90% are SMEs and include growers, retailers, suppliers, growing media manufacturers, designers and landscapers who collectively deliver the gardens, green spaces, and green infrastructure that delivers for the economy, environment, and our health and wellbeing. The HTA's 10 members who manufacture growing media, amongst other activities, have a combined turnover of nearly £500 million. The entire sector delivers £38bn to GDP and supports 722,000 jobs. With the right conditions, the sector has a growth potential of 45% in the 2020s, to reach £51.2 billion by 2030 (in 2023 prices) and support 763,000 jobs across the UK economy, this includes lifting regulatory barriers.

### **Peat-free progress, technology and investment**

From amateur to professional, huge progress in reducing peat-use has been made. This progress has come despite several challenges which arise in peat-free horticultural production. There is no 'one-size-fits-all' growing medium for the thousands of plant species propagated and grown in the UK. No like-for-like alternative performs to the same standard as peat in terms of moisture and nutrient retention and physical make-up of growing media. It is a huge undertaking to change a system that has been developed over decades to produce £1.7bn worth of plants and trees needed to supply Britain's 30 million gardeners, tree-planting for agricultural settings and more, and to

green our cities to help adapt to climate change. Professional horticulture growers typically plan ahead for commercially grown plant species; this can take 3 or more years and is in growing cycles of different seasons.

Bagged growing media sold in retail settings previously the largest source of peat continuing to head towards 'zero', and commercial growers continuing to invest in the equipment, materials, time and trials the trajectory to reaching peat-free is set. Changing from peat – a stable and relatively homogenous substance – to many alternatives in mixes, requires scientific and nursery trials and greater management. In-crop sensors that monitor water content, electro conductivity levels (EC – measuring potassium and sodium), and temperature can provide real-time data to guide growers before symptoms appear. When paired with precision irrigation systems, this ensures water is applied only when needed. HTA grower members have actively participated in the RHS peat-free trials project, focusing on innovative, data-driven solutions. This includes monitoring plant health and sharing best practices through workshops led by the HTA. Encouragingly, these trials have seen a number of successes so far. The RHS peat-free trials are due to complete in October 2027.

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

### HTA 2025 Grower Peat Data

There was a continued reduction in peat usage in the **professional growing sector, with overall usage in 2024 at 34.4%**, marking a 5% reduction from 2023 (39.5%).

**Around 25% of growers reported being peat-free**, but there is still a lot of uncertainty around timescales for being able to go peat-free amongst majority of growers.

**Key challenges** in the transition are the management of nutrients/fertilisers, cost/profitability, and irrigation; with many growers highlighting a need for greater knowledge transfer.

### Conclusion / Summary: Certainty, communication and engagement

Certainty over the future of UK peat-free policy is needed, and the HTA calls for clear guidance from government and the creation of a balanced, expert group to establish a roadmap with workstreams focused on key issues, such as, but not limited to, quality. Consumers – the UK's 30 million gardeners – are equally important, and government should support industry collaboration on consumer education to support their success as peat-free gardeners.

The HTA seeks and welcomes engagement on the issues set out in this paper, and is undertaking a significant programme of support for its members, more details can be found here:

<https://hta.org.uk/peat> or contact [policy@hta.org.uk](mailto:policy@hta.org.uk).