

THE RISE AND FALL OF PEAT IN UK HORTICULTURE

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SUMMARY

This paper provides a chronological review of the use of peat in UK growing media with particular emphasis on developments since 2005. Recent Government initiatives to phase out all horticultural peat use by 2030 and the responses of sections of the horticultural industry are discussed together with latest available data on the extent of peat replacement in the UK and elsewhere in the EU. 100 years after the birth of John Innes compost - it seems quite possible that the horticultural use of peat in the UK could be reduced to almost zero for flawed and politically driven reasons.

INTRODUCTION

This paper updates one presented in 2006 to the IPS Peat in Horticulture Symposium in Amsterdam entitled 'Peat usage in growing media from John Innes to Peatering Out™' (Waller, 2006) and is based on an oral presentation given to the 46th Deutscher Torf- und Humustag in October 2011.

The original 2006 paper provided a detailed history and review of the drivers for peat replacement in the UK and the Government's peat reduction targets. Much has happened since; peat replacement has continued steadily in the UK, but the Government now requires the 'voluntary' and total elimination of peat from retail and professional horticulture by 2030 at the latest. In this paper the recent Government initiatives and the responses of sections of the horticultural industry are discussed together with latest available data on the extent of peat replacement in the UK and elsewhere in the EU.

Brief résumé of situation up to 2005

The routine use of peat in UK growing media (GM) began in the 1930s with John Innes compost (JI) containing 25% peat, but by the 1970s all-peat mixes came to dominate the market due to their reliability, performance and low weight. In the 1980s and '90s Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) campaigned to stop peat harvesting on lowland raised bogs in the UK (and beyond), especially on sites designated as having special scientific or conservation value such as SSSIs and SACs. In 1992 the Government tightened the planning rules relating to peat harvesting and in 1994 developed the UK Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) which included a Habitat Action Plan for Lowland Raised Bogs. In 1997, uniquely in the EU, the Department for the Environment and Rural Affairs (Defra) established peat reduction targets of 40% by 2005 and 90% by 2010 for the whole industry.

Data from two Government reports (Defra, 2006 and 2010a) on peat usage have been combined in Table 1. The overall proportion of peat in GM peaked around 1997 and declined

in both GM and soil improvers (SI) thereafter; by 2005 peat usage was down to just 53% overall, thus beating the Defra target by 7%. This was due in part to the dilution effect of increased sales of peat-free SI sold in the UK amateur market.

Year	Growing Media			Soil Improvers	Total Market
	Hobby	Professional	Overall		
1993	91			25	
1997	96			10	
1999	94	95	94	9	64
2001	92	92	90	6	60
2005	84	80	82	7	53
2007	72	81	73	2	40
2009	68	76	70	1	42

Table 1. Peat content of Growing Media and Soil Improvers sold in UK, 1993-2009 (% v)

Two studies (EPAGMA, 2006 and Schmilewski, 2008) found that total GM production in the EU in 2005 was, respectively, around 37 or 35M cubic metres with a peat content of 79% v or 77% v. The peat content of GM made in five EU peat producing countries has been calculated (Table 2) and shows that UK-manufactured GM had only an ‘EU-average’ peat content. This is well below other EU peat-producing countries and a response the UK’s anti-peat policies.

Country	EPAGMA (2006)	Schmilewski (2008)
Finland	94	89
Germany	93	93
Ireland	92	91
Sweden	84	86
UK	78	78
Mean of all reported data	79	77
Total GM Volume (000s cu. m.)	37040	34632

Table 2. Peat content of Growing Media made in the five EU peat-producing countries in 2005 (% v)

2006 to 2012

Although the Government’s 2005 40% peat reduction target was exceeded, Defra recognised that their desire for a 90% reduction in peat use by 2010 (which had never been agreed by producers) was unachievable. However, fearing the potential imposition of legislation or peat taxation the GM producers pressed on with peat reduction.

2008 - The Growing Media Initiative (GMI)

This scheme was developed in 2008 by the Horticultural Trades Association (HTA) in conjunction with the Growing Media Association (GMA), DIY and Garden Centre retailers, Defra, the RSPB and the RHS. It is managed by an elected Steering Group and audited by independent third party auditors. (See - <http://www.growingmediainitiative.org.uk>).

Membership is open to all retailers and GM manufacturers who are committed to achieving

90% peat replacement in their business. Gold members are at least 90% peat free (e.g. Melcourt), and full members must be at least 55% peat free (e.g. B&Q). Provisional membership is available to companies who are at least 20% peat free and committed to achieving 90% replacement by making year on year reductions. This group includes Bord na Mona, Westland and the Scotts Company.

With this scheme in place Defra confirmed they would not be bringing forward any legislation or taxation proposal. There would be a new target for hobby market GM however, but not one for plant producers – for the time being.

2009 – The latest data on UK peat usage

Government data on peat use in 2009 (Defra, 2010a) confirmed that progress on peat reduction (in percentage terms) had stalled and the overall percentage of peat used in GM and SI in 2009 was actually slightly higher than in 2007 (Table 1). Of greater concern for Defra's objectives was the fact that, because of an increase in the volume of GM sales to hobby gardeners over the last decade, the total quantity of peat being used in UK GM had only reduced by 11%, from 3.29M to 2.93M cubic metres per annum, of which 68% was imported.

This report also showed that peat was being replaced in GM principally by bark (32%) and green compost (26%), followed by woodfibre (16%) and loam (14%), with coir etc. making up the remaining 12%.

2010 – Defra consultation on reducing the horticultural use of peat in England

In March 2010 Defra proposed a new target; all bagged, hobby market GM should be peat-free by 2020. The HTA/GMA responded by reaffirming their commitment to peat reduction (GMA, 2010) and said 'we welcome the new proposed Government target with the right support from the government, it can be achieved'.

In December Defra (2010b) went further and initiated a formal Consultation on proposals to not only eliminate all peat from amateur gardening by 2020, but to phase out peat in professional horticulture by 2030 – at the latest. However, their case was not well supported by their own quantitative evidence. Data on the relative GHG contributions of peat and other GM constituents was inconclusive (Defra, 2010c), whilst the role that horticultural peat use plays in the carbon economy and its practical significance to UK GHG emissions was exaggerated. No justification was given to support the assertion that ceasing peat harvesting would enhance biodiversity – indeed a draft report on this topic (reviewed by this author) was so insubstantial that it remains unpublished nearly three years after it was due. The Government case also played down data in two of its other reports (Defra 2010d and 2009) which respectively demonstrated the massive cost that is being borne by GM producers to replace peat and concerns about the availability and quality of non-peat materials.

2011- Natural Environment White Paper

In June 2011 the Government published a Natural Environment White Paper, 'The Natural Choice: securing the value of nature' (Defra, 2011). Despite well-informed objections raised during the Consultation, the White Paper reiterated the proposals to reduce all peat use to zero by 2030 and threatened alternative measures if progress was inadequate. A Task Force would also be created to facilitate the process and to overcome barriers (see below). Responses to this were polarised within the industry; the HTA/GMA/GMI (largely representing the retail market) were again supportive whilst the National Farmers Union (NFU), representing

growers, said its targets on peat were ‘disappointing’, ‘not supported by the available evidence’ and ‘hugely challenging for the industry’.

In July 2011, the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) published a ‘Draft National Planning Policy Framework’ (DCLG, 2011) in which the only explicitly stated prohibition was that Local Authorities should ‘not grant planning permission for peat extraction from new or extended sites’.

2011-2012 - The Sustainable Growing Media Task Force (SGMTF)

Originally known as the Peat Task Force, the SGMTF remit has been broadened under the chairmanship of Dr Alan Knight OBE, to that of ‘putting the horticultural sector on a long-term sustainable footing by ensuring that all of the growing media (or substrate) used in horticulture is sustainable’.

The Steering Group has identified twelve projects in four groups (Sustainable GM, Role of public policy, Growing media performance use and price, and Consumer communications) on which the SGMTF needs to report in just a few months if it is to be able to provide guidance to the Minister for Natural Environment and Fisheries by the June 2012 deadline (see <http://www.defra.gov.uk/peat-taskforce/work/>).

At the time of preparing this paper (February 2012) it is too early to report on these projects. However, according to a newspaper report (Yorkshire Post, 2012), growers and their supporters (including Prof. Jack Reily, the UK Secretary for IPS) are now getting their arguments heard. In an exchange of correspondence, the Chairman and the Minister responsible have recently acknowledged that the argument is more complicated than ‘all peat is bad’. Specifically, the SGMTF has agreed to re-evaluate the environmental footprints of all GM constituents; and to establish ‘what is meant by sustainable GM’; a move which the NFU considers as ‘positive’. Nevertheless, the Chairman thinks ‘it still made sense to try to phase out peat’ and in response the Minister has reiterated that ‘a peat-free horticultural industry is the desired outcome’.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

It has been UK Government policy to reduce peat usage since the 1990s. The pressure on the industry has been considerable and in getting to the current position (of about 30% peat replacement in GM) manufacturers have absorbed significant additional material and development costs, whilst selling prices have fallen in real terms.

Now, Defra is seeking to have the industry ‘voluntarily’ eliminate peat totally from all sectors by 2030 and has said it will take action if this does not progress adequately. Manufacturers supplying the consumer market who have been actively reducing the peat content of their media for over a decade (at their own expense) have ‘welcomed’ the target of going peat-free by 2020. Indeed, there has been surprisingly little resistance from them, given the negative effect on their margins. On the other hand, many professional growers see a threat to their livelihoods through a misleading, misguided and politically driven policy which fails to acknowledge the technical and commercial realities of plant and food production within the EU. It is difficult to understand how a policy which risks reducing production efficiency and increases costs will, as claimed by Defra, give UK growers a competitive advantage over

other EU growers who are not under such constraints. Perhaps it is because this Government mistakenly believes that it can export this anti-peat policy across the EU.

The recent, potentially positive shift in the direction of the SGMTF is to be welcomed. However, even if a more rational approach to the facts about horticultural peat and its alternatives is adopted, it must be remembered that this is a political issue with a convenient climate-change dimension. Both the Minister responsible and his appointed SGMTF Chairman still believe that peat use should be phased out completely and a U-turn by the Coalition Government which avows to be 'Britain's greenest-ever' seems highly unlikely. So, by 2030 – 100 years after the birth of the JI compost – it is quite possible that we shall see the use of peat reduced to almost zero in most of UK horticulture.

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