

The Peat Debate and Commercial Growing

General Overview

- Peat and peat-based growing media have been successfully used in British commercial growing since the 1950's.
- In the late 1980's potential environmental destruction caused by extracting peat was highlighted by a well-coordinated and funded campaign. The aim of the Peatlands Campaign Consortium was either to stop or substantially reduce peat use in both commercial and domestic landscaping and growing. In recent years the value of peatlands as carbon sinks has been acknowledged in addition to their value as hosts for a unique flora and fauna.
- Some traditional uses of peat were easy to address, as better, more cost-effective and environmentally acceptable products became available, including bark-based mulches, soil ameliorants and peat-free tree planting media.
- Finding suitable alternatives to peat for the growing of commercial horticultural crops such as nursery stock, bedding and pot plants has proved more challenging.
- In earlier days many products were rushed onto the market, often without adequate research and development work. They were also far too expensive. The premium price expectations for peat-free products has not and probably will not materialize.

The Situation Today

- The experience of the last two decades since the onset of the peat debate, has shown that there are only three main groups of materials which can seriously be classed as alternatives to peat. Any product which is too expensive compared to peat, does not work well enough or is not available in large enough quantities is excluded from this list. Also excluded are materials which are only locally available. However, some of these do offer great potential for those situated close to the source of supply. Bracken is one such example.
- Coir is one material which has proved that it can provide the right conditions for good growth, if handled properly. It usually performs better in mixes with other materials than on its own. It is important that coir is only purchased from reputable suppliers who understand growers' needs for consistency and quality.
- Composted green residues or "green compost" can be used under certain circumstances at levels in the mix of up to 50%. Most applications restrict their use to 30%. They can provide an excellent source of slow release nutrients, are widely available (although not always of the quality demanded) and are cheap relative to peat provided they are sourced locally. However they have the disadvantage of pH's in excess of 7, high soluble salt level and high bulk density. For these reasons growers contemplating using green composts need to be sure about the formulations they wish to use and that the supplier understands the need for consistency and reliability.
- The third main group of true alternatives to peat are the by-products of the forest and timber industries, ie the barks and wood fibres. These have to date provided some of the most effective peat alternatives as they, like peat, have inherently low pH and nutrient contents and they can be screened to virtually any particle size required in order to achieve the correct air-water balance in a mix. Also, the industry has long experience of handling such materials which far pre-dates the peat debate.
- In 1997 after five years of extensive research and development, Melcourt introduced Sylvafibre[®], a composted wood fibre which together with the long-established Melcourt Growbark[®], a fine composted bark, could be used as the basis for a peat-free growing media for a wide variety of growing applications. In the years since introduction, both products have proved themselves both in trials and in commercial use to provide excellent, cost-effective results.

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The Peat Debate and Commercial Growing (Continued)

- In 2001 Melcourt introduced the Sylvamix range of professional peat-free growing media. Sylvamix Nursery Stock, Potting, Natural (organic) and Special prescription mixes enable the grower to use a thoroughly tried and tested range of peat alternatives which allow cost-effective production using totally sustainable materials.
- In March 2010 the Government updated its peat reduction targets, requiring retail growing media sold in garden centres to be totally peat-free by 2020. The target for professional growers will be set later in 2010 after a consultation with stakeholders.
- A cross-industry body known as the Growing Media Initiative has been set up to reward and promote the use of alternatives to peat. Melcourt was a founder member of the GMI and was amongst the first companies to gain Gold level membership.



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