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Dr Olly Watts
RSPB Sustainable Development Department
The Lodge, Sandy, Bedfordshire SG19 2DL
Tel: 01767 680551 Fax: 01767 685142

Authors

Paul Alexander	Royal Horticultural Society
Neil Bragg	Bulrush Horticulture Ltd; British Protected Ornamentals Association; British Ornamental Plant Producers scheme
George Padelopoulos	B&Q plc
Olly Watts	Royal Society for the Protection of Birds

Transforming growing media in the UK: a partnership approach.

Peat has proven itself as an excellent growing medium within horticulture over the last 40 years. Its physical and chemical attributes present a unique rooting environment for plants. However, environmentalists, government and the horticultural industry in the UK recognise the environmental concerns of the use of peat. The UK government has helped to end peat extraction on several key peatlands in the UK but all interested parties are concerned peat use needs to be replaced by appropriate and effective alternatives, rather than simply switching the environmental burden to other countries.

An 18 year campaign in the UK to end the reliance on peat use has met with only partial success. Environmentally aware consumers immediately grasped this as an important issue but the campaign failed to achieve widespread public resonance: it is a complicated message to sell. The UK Government introduced targets for peat replacement, which have helped stimulate the industry to investigate suitable alternatives. The major multiple retailers have also been powerful drivers of change, by adopting peat replacement targets in their environmental codes of practice. Peat replacement through an ongoing process of increasing peat dilution is starting to achieve dramatic reduction in peat usage for a number of companies, with diluents including green compost and processed timber waste. The two main users of peat in the UK, amateur gardeners and the plant growing industry, have slightly different issues about peat substitution, but there are also many similar concerns, most of which have now been addressed. Carbon issues and climate change are also starting to focus more attention on peatland conservation.

Today in the UK, the horticultural industry (manufacturers, growers, retailers etc) and environmentalists are working in partnership to speed up the replacement of peat, towards meeting the UK's target of 90% peat replacement by 2010. Innovation and investment is helping to take some of the major companies toward meeting the target with what they perceive to be better products.

The Authors

Dr Paul Alexander
Royal Horticultural Society, Wisley, Woking, Surrey GU23 6QB UK
paulalexander@rhs.org.uk
Soil Scientist with UK's leading gardening charity which is dedicated to advancing horticulture and promoting good gardening.

Neil Bragg
Bulrush Horticulture Ltd, Church Road, Coalbrookdale, Telford, FT8 7NS, UK
neilbragg@btinternet.com
Product Development Manager with UK growing media manufacturer. Technical expertise in developing peat, peat reduced and peat free growing media for both professional and amateur use.

Also represents the British Protected Ornamentals Association and the British Ornamental Plant Producers.

George Padelopoulos

B&Q plc, Portswood House, 1 Hampshire Corporate Park, Chandlers Ford, Eastleigh, Hampshire, SO53 3YX, UK

George.Padelopoulos@b-and-q.co.uk

Social Responsibility Advisor with the UK's leading multiple DIY / gardening retailer, which has been at the forefront of stimulating the UK industry's move towards peat reduction.

Dr Olly Watts

Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, The Lodge, Sandy, Bedfordshire, SG19 2DL UK

olly.watts@rspb.org.uk

Sustainable Development Policy Officer with the UK largest nature conservation NGO, which has spearheaded the environmental concerns about peat extraction and peat use in the UK.

The authors represent environmental, gardening, growing media production and retail interests in the UK. Despite our different interests and concerns, we are part of a larger collaborative group in the UK that is striving to speed up the widespread use of effective, competitive peat alternative materials for all but specialist uses of peat.