
PEAT FREE SUPPLIERS FORUM

Feedback from Inaugural Meeting held 27th June 2022

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INTRODUCTION

Our use of peat based plants and products in the horticultural industry is definitely high up on the “sustainability” agenda for most organisations. However, government is not acting in a clear decisive way for the eradication of peat use in our industry and many growers and suppliers are taking the long route to remove it from within their supply chain. The drive for other more sustainable growing media is becoming more urgent.

However, there are suppliers of peat free mediums and those who are growing plants peat free. To my knowledge there is not an organisation that brings together this important group. There are lots who always have, or converted their business to peat free some years ago. It these pioneers, alongside those who are taking that journey now whom I felt needed to be celebrated and recognised for their endeavours, and brought together to share best practice, issues and opportunities as one voice.

Speaking on numerous occasions with Julia Boulton, MD of Beth Chatto she was delighted to support this initiative and generously opened up the nursery with her team to host the inaugural Peat Free Growers Forum, on what would have been Beth’s 99th Birthday. Andy Jasper, Head of Parks and Gardens at the National Trust was also instantly supportive at the Trust has been peat free for over 25 years across its estate. Andy was a keynote speaker sharing his knowledge and enthusiasm with the group.

My aim is to be a facilitator to a group of predominantly small growers, and to help them strengthen communication within the industry and to the public about what they do, but importantly to unite on the future needs of growing plants more sustainably, and helping anyone else who wants to be on this path. This forum is not “owned” by anyone person or organisation, but until such time that it may well be, I am happy to carry on with the role as facilitator, and work to find venues and hosts to ensure regular meetings.

The next few pages is feedback from the event, and I’m looking forward to our next one 23rd January, Calke Abbey Ticknall, Derby, Derbyshire, DE73 7JF, kindly hosted by the National Trust.

Many thanks

Arit Anderson

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ATTENDANCE

- 80 invitations went out to attend the meeting and we had 51 people from 32 companies attend.
 - 33 attendee left details to be included in the feedback, and of which 23 people opened the survey and 14 actually responded
 - 42% response rate to those it was sent to, or 60% response rate to those that opened the survey
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FEEDBACK ON THE EVENT

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Feedback on the event

How useful did you find this event?

Rating	Strongly Disagree				Strongly Agree
Score	1	2	3	4	5
No respondents				2	12

Do you think that there is further value in joining together as independent nurseries & associated organisations interested in sustainability?

Rating	No	Yes
No respondents		14

Was the length of the event too long, too short, just right?

Rating	Too long	Too Short	Just Right
No respondents		1	13

Did facilities meet your needs?

Rating	No	Yes
No respondents		14

Would you tell other relevant colleagues/suppliers/organisations about this event?

Rating	No	Yes
No respondents		14

one comment - "colleges are a good source of new horticulturists and it would benefit some students I believe"

Would you like to be involved with future meetings for peat-free nurseries?

Rating	No	Yes
No respondents		14

How frequently would you like to meet?

Rating	Yearly	Twice Yearly	Quarterly
No respondents	7	6	1

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Feedback on the event

At this informal event we very loosely invited from the National Trust peat free nursery list and also to those nurseries we already have close contact with. Are their other nurseries that should be invited?

I forwarded on your invite to all nurseries participating in Plant Fairs Roadshow and I'm happy to do so again

Open to any. RHS Plant centres?

Garden Designers, Landscape architects.. etc, as they are often the people who choose large quantities of plants.

A grower who is trying to go peat free but struggling with some plants:

Debs Ednie debs@ivyhatchplantsupplies.co.uk

Woottens

<https://bryantsnurseries.co.uk/>

<https://www.shantocknurseries.co.uk/>

<https://www.facebook.com/Sunnyside-Nursery-100718444766375>

What other organisations or bodies or specialists do you think could be invited to future events? Eg HTA, NFU, SGD, GMG, etc. Please list

All of the above & BALI, APL

RHS

B&Q there use of Peat-Free

Perhaps Garden Media companies later on to help spread the message?

HTA definitely, they are keen to help make the switch but don't agree with the timescale, even though they have done little over the last 10 years to help their members.

Wider range of compost manufacturers

Flowers from the farm?

RBG Kew/ Wakehurst (expertise in experimenting with peat free media for specialist plant collections E.g. carnivorous)

1. HTA

2. Worshipful Company of Gardeners (Ian Barrow Head of Horticulture at Sunnyside is a member)

Those attending felt more representation from other suppliers of peat free products would have given a more balanced representation

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COMMUNICATION/INTERPRETATION/ OPINION OF PEAT VS PEAT FREE

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Communication/interpretation/opinion of peat vs peat free

Do you think that the following term could be used in the case of plug plants that are bought in from a peat nursery:

“ Grown on in peat-free compost in the UK”?

Rating	Strongly Disagree				Strongly Agree
Score	1	2	3	4	5
No respondents			2	5	6

Do you think that the term “peat free” could be used where there is a tiny amount of peat used in production?

Rating	Strongly Disagree				Strongly Agree
Score	1	2	3	4	5
No respondents	6	2	2	1	2

Do you think that “peat free” growers should all be 100% peat free?

Rating	Strongly Disagree				Strongly Agree
Score	1	2	3	4	5
No respondents	1	2	3	4	4

Do you think there should be a trademark of some sort that recognises peat-free grower?

Rating	Strongly Disagree				Strongly Agree
Score	1	2	3	4	5
No respondents	1	3	5	3	2

Communication/interpretation/opinion of peat vs peat free

Do you currently make your customers aware of your use (or not) of peat?

Rating	No	Yes
No respondents		14

If yes How?

On our website and flyers, but on reflection not visible enough

We explain we are peat free in our own production.

We also sell peat free to our customers

Social media, email footer & Mailchimp mail-outs

No fanfare, only through drip feed such on website and some publicity

We advertise ourselves as a peat free nursery and tell the public whenever asked.

Detailed on the website that we use peat free compost

Every plant label has "Peat Free" printed on it. Social media posts tagged with #peatfree, leaflet features peat-free etc.

Not applicable as far as retail customers are concerned because we are an arboretum. The nursery that I am responsible for is visited by other interested parties and there is always discussion about compost.

Conversation

Social media, website mention - I think I could do better though

We speak to customers about the fact that our mix is loam based and that we mix it ourselves but we don't explicitly state that we're 'peat free'.

Retail - new posters in the sales area. New signage on display. Website updated. Social media.

Via our website, customer contact, peat free composts for sale and prominently displayed

Do you make your customers aware of what peat is and the environmental impact of using it?

Rating	No	Yes
No respondents	5	6

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Communication/interpretation/opinion of peat vs peat free

If yes how?

Explain to customers why we do not use peat.

Only really by talking face-to-face at the moment. Need to add something to website.

Small amount of talking about it on social media

5 large posters with PF logo and one of the fives story is:

Sunnyside Plants and Vegetables we grow Peat Free

"Here at Sunnyside Rural Trust, we are proud to be green champions. We are dedicated to using peat free compost. The 25 tons of compost we use each year for sowing, potting, growing thousands of plants and vegetable is all peat - free. Join us in protecting our environment by making green choices and choosing peat free options"

Do you speak to your suppliers of plants to request peat free?

Rating	No	Yes
No respondents	10	3

No - As a small nursery I don't feel we have a strong enough relationship

No - but we are going to ask the question now

No - Dutch especially are not entertaining peat-free

Yes - now regular subject and info is often volunteered

No - I found the conversation about buying in young plants propagated in peat interesting, and how to find these peat free from now on.

No - We propagate everything on site

No - We don't buy in to re-sell.

No - I grow mainly myself from seed

Yes - Yes, we do speak to our suppliers, but they have their own constraints / business plans / agenda and on our own we are a small purchaser.

Would be great to encourage more plug producers to join us next time e.g., Ball & Colgrave, to hear what they are doing and emphasise the requirement with them of PF lines.

Yes - For many growers having tried peat free compost they have not been satisfied that commercially they can commit due to watering / feeding uncertainties. Thus most are on peat reduced compost.

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We believe that customers need to be given the facts so that they can make an informed choice. If there was a poster showing the impact of peat use would you display it?

Rating	Strongly Disagree				Strongly Agree
Score	1	2	3	4	5
No respondents		1	2	3	8

If you agree with this statement please add comments as to who you think should organise this e.g. government, trade assoc etc. Would you pay a fee and if so how much?

Unsure

Not sure of long term value as UK moves towards peat free anyway

We find all those issues problematic

I don't think there are enough of us entirely peat free to warrant this yet

Growing media manufacturers perhaps? Cost included in compost?!

This would add unfair costs onto plants grown peat free, and wouldn't stop peat grown plants being available. You can't have just a little bit of peat in production, there is economy of scale in peat mining so it all has to stop otherwise markets will be generated to keep selling it and to keep the peat mining going. We have alternatives that work, we just don't have facilities and growers with the required skills that can make it work consistently. Ban peat altogether and the need will drive the change

I believe that until there is a proven alternative to peat in propagation that there is an inevitability that the vast majority of growers will have a tiny amount of peat in their pots of some species

Government

In answer to "Do you think that peat free growers should all be 100% peat free?" Answer is yes but it will be over a period of time. It's controlling the incomings that is more difficult.

In answer to trademarks - organised by a trade assoc.

Common symbol that's agreed to

PEAT FREE NURSERIES - SHARE EXPERIENCE/SUPPORT

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PEAT FREE NURSERIES - SHARE EXPERIENCE/SUPPORT

What trials are you currently running?

We've been using Melcourt for 6yrs now after Ad hoc trials then, do try other makes from time to time (unscientifically it must be said) interested to try Jiffy about which I've heard good reports.

We have stopped trialling and decided lets just do it or all that will happen is we will procrastinate

Looking at trialing Lavender in a different mix - experiencing 50% losses in current mix.

Evaluation of peat free sowing mixes

We trial adding council green waste to our bought in Melcourt compost

Dalesfoot compost for all potting last year - terrible losses of grasses and some perennials, Using Melcourt this year - having to add feed to grasses to stop yellowing

Home-made propagation mixes - different every year! Bark/Coir/sand mostly

None other than using my own compost mix which seems to be performing well

Propagation media

Comparing Levington seed compost with a new horizon one

We're happy with how our peat free mix performs but would like to trial leaf mould or similar materials which we can produce on site as a substitute for bought in raw materials such as composted bark

Seed and cutting trials. Experiments with both using different grades of PF compost. Choice is very limited. as fine compost is required, especially for seeds. Any links with others doing this would be great

We have been using Melcourt Nursery Stock over last 3 years but this year in particular are concerned that the quality is not consistent - very fine structure leading to compaction, lack of air in compost & constant feeding, despite using Osmocote, to maintain growth. Not helped by need for constant watering this year. requested Rep visit in September to discuss. Also investigating ICL - rep meeting in Sept

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PEAT FREE NURSERIES - SHARE EXPERIENCE/SUPPORT

What are the key points/actions you took away from the 'peat free' day?

More needs to be done to make our own use of Peat Free more public

As usual David Ward was a mine of information

Interesting to see your use of stock beds

The idea that we should always be truthful, so if there is a small amount of peat used in any area of production this should be stated in a positive way. we are moving towards the peat free but this then brings other substrates such a coir into the mix...

We need to as customers ourselves from other sources be asking for peat free alternatives. if we don't push this ourselves then who is?

Meeting other growers and listening to options and opportunities

The importance of "shouting" about our peat free status and having the confidence to continue the conversation with our local council. Useful to discuss different issues around watering and realistic issues with peat free, still plenty of ethical considerations to tackle.

So useful to meet other growers and swap ideas. Types of toppers to try, different peat free composts available, an understanding of issues that many growers face. And a great respect for Arit in bringing us together - Thank you.

How you manage your open ground stock

1) Stabilising the microbial activity - Rep from ICL confirmed that peat free materials are not composted, just milled and mixed. Why are we surprised that using waterproof pine bark then doesn't hold water well and needs chemical wetting agents to help it. Dalefoot composts have since confirmed that they have a composting process that takes up to 5 months, so microbial activity has a chance to stabilise and they don't add any chemical additives, hence the Soil Association organic certification. This could explain the inconsistency reported by growers, if media is kept at different moisture and temperature levels in the growing conditions, the microbial activity in the media will likely have different soil respiration and nutrient requirements and give different results.

2) Irrigation during growers trials - All ICL's trials compare media by using the same watering volumes. This might seem like good scientific method but it makes no sense from a growers perspective, they would (or should) alter irrigation as the plants demand for water changes. Personally, I think soil moisture should be the variable that is held constant and the required water volumes to maintain that recorded. Keeping soil moisture constant would mean equal access to air and water in the root zone for different media.

3) Shocked to hear growers not acknowledging that watering regimes should change when switching media, despite David Ward explaining how they had changed irrigation significantly.

4) Statistics were mentioned: Only 3% of land is peat bog and ~Horticulture only uses 2% of the peat extracted. These statistics are irrelevant. The more important statistics that weren't mentioned were peatlands cover 3% of the global land but account for 30% of the carbon stored in soils. By area, peat can store more carbon than a tropical rain forest. Why are we appalled at deforestation overseas and not mining peat in the UK?

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What are the key points/actions you took away from the 'peat free' day? (continued)

Sharing of knowledge.

Seeing and talking about different methods of growing plants.

I have a better understanding of the different composts and what seems to currently work well.

Make a larger point to spread the word we grow peat free.

Mainly that using peat free was not an outlandish thing to be doing and sticking to! Lots of high profile nurseries are doing the same!

Since we're already peat free, it was useful and interesting to hear the different ways nurseries are approaching the use of alternative media and the various issues they're having. It's got us thinking about reducing the use of raw materials more generally aiming for a closed loop system by utilising the waste we produce E.g. composting material that's suitable for potting media, or producing our own leaf mould. Another approach might be to reduce the size at which we sell plants, therefore reducing the amount of raw materials used. We've begun trialling this with good results but have realised that it's only appropriate so far as it doesn't negatively impact the health of the plant. We'd also support efforts to challenge suppliers of plug plants who still use peat; we already propagate the vast majority of plants we sell but may be able to increase this. Thank you for hosting the event, and we look forward to taking part in any future talks on these topics.

1. networking with like-minded nurseries / people
2. Swapping ideas and thoughts
3. Seeing behind the scenes at the BC Gardens and some of the working principles
4. PF principles discussion

Your practices for reducing peat in compost particularly in the stock beds

PEAT FREE NURSERIES - SHARE EXPERIENCE/SUPPORT

What areas of your business would you like to see discussed / addressed?

interested to see a cost/benefit analysis

Interested to see if there is any work done on whether public is prepared to pay more for plants grown peat free

Nothing specific

Exploring other potting and planting media - homemade, crushed aggregate, etc.

How to cope with climate change in the nursery trade.

CRF and other artificial ingredients in compost.

Water management and irrigation scheduling. Demonstrate practically, (ie pour water through pots), how different composts have different water holding capacity and different air filled porosity and therefore grow roots at different rates.

More discussions about production from other nurseries.

Wages and cost of living for people in our industry, particularly in areas of the country where there's a high proportion of second homes and Air BnBs which means there's a huge lack of affordable rental accommodation. A trade union specifically for horticulturalists to help us advocate for ourselves as skilled professionals; we're now expected to train for years, gaining experience even unpaid as interns and volunteers to then be offered minimum wage and low wage employment. This has wider implications for diversity and access to the industry which as we know is a huge topic for the RHS, National Trust and other institutions but so far the issue of wages has been entirely ignored.

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