

Peat use in horticulture ban

HTA position paper – May 2023

Britain's green industry:

Environmental (ornamental) Horticulture underwrites 50% of the 25-year Environment Plan, reduces air-pollution and mitigates climate change. Similarly, tree planting initiatives, Biodiversity Net Gain regulations, increasing green infrastructure to reduce peak temperatures and Nature Based Solutions to minimise flood risks will all require the sector to deliver vast quantities of plants and trees for private and public procurement purposes.

Progress on sustainably transitioning away from peat:

The sector has been working towards the removal of peat from bags of compost used by 30million gardeners - the ambition to end the retail sale of peat in amateur use growing media by the end of 2024 is achievable due to the sectors significant progress. The industry is now at a historic low for the use of peat and has made great progress, with peat content in bags of compost sold at retail halving in the last year alone. The sector has also launched a Responsible Sourcing certification scheme to publicly score its products for environmental impact.

Challenges to overcome:

It is a huge undertaking to change a system that has been developed over decades to produce £1.6b of plants and trees needed to supply Britain's 30million gardeners and to green our cities to help adapt to climate change.

For many growers, R&D, trials, seasons, species, costs and environment are just some of the factors that make going 100% peat-free a real challenge to produce plants and trees at the quality and quantity needed to meet both market demand and environmental targets.

With the long established government target of 2030 now arbitrarily reduced to 2026, it is too soon for professional growers to be 100% peat free. 2026 represents a cliff-edge for many tree and plant growers who require more seasons to trial peat-free mixes and certainty over the availability of quality, sustainable alternatives.

Similarly, no consideration has been given to the fact that the diversion of peat-free material to satisfy the 2024 retail ban will likely distort the market and shift much-needed material to help trials and further transition.

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

About us

The Horticultural Trades Association (HTA) represents 1500 members in the Environmental Horticulture Sector including; garden centre retailers, tree and plant growers, goods manufacturers, landscapers,

and service providers. Our industry supports nearly 700,000 jobs, has a national GDP of £28.8 billion, mitigates climate change and benefits health and wellbeing for 30 million gardeners in the UK.

Further information

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Defra changes the date on ban – impossible for many UK growers:

The government's original ambition was for England to be peat free by 2030. Although challenging, this date was accepted by the HTA as creating the time to have a workable transition away from peat. This is why Defra's recent ([24 March](#)) indication that a ban for professional plant and tree growers will come into effect four years earlier, at the end of 2026, even with (limited and unconfirmed) phased exemptions, has caused widespread concern and alarm amongst professional users and growers.

The late and unexpected movement of the goalposts from 2030 to 2026 will significantly impact growers and businesses across the UK. They are already navigating soaring energy costs, threatened water security and significant changes to cross-border trade processes and procedures. This is occurring in a context where 50% of the 25-Year Environment Plan relies on a thriving horticulture industry to deliver the government's ambitions. This policy risks not being able to deliver on this.

The 2026 date comes without any assessment of the impact on UK horticultural growers and businesses. The report recently published by the Office for the Internal Market and the Impact Assessment, undertaken by Defra for the 2021 Consultation, were both based on 2028 with exemptions beyond being the earliest potential end date for peat use in professional horticulture. The government's own response to the consultation in August 2022 stated, "the professional horticulture sector faces additional technical barriers that will take longer to overcome". The sector was, and is still, working to a 2030 deadline.

Damaging impact on trees, plants, business, jobs, and imports:

The HTA estimates that the difference between the announced 2026 date and Defra's impact assessment's focus on a 2028 date seriously jeopardises 85% of the UK's plant and tree production, and, with imports subject to the same requirements, the ban also poses a significant threat to the UK government's tree planting and urban greening ambitions.

It also risks permanently reducing the nation's capacity to produce plants and trees as businesses fail or exit the market. As a result of the 2026 ban, the HTA envisages many SME and family businesses in our sector no longer being commercially viable and empty shelves in garden retailers because of market contraction and restriction on the ability to grow such a variety of species in the UK. In addition, there is a risk that being forced to use inferior peat free alternatives will reduce both the quality and the shelf-life of many plants and lead to significant wastage increases.

The intention is to treat imports equally. This presents a trade barrier, and the handling of imports is critical and will impact our international competitiveness. We have long trading relationships and pride ourselves in garden retail for the variety and product range we offer to the millions of UK gardeners. This policy threatens this choice. Over 85% of our houseplants are imported. Furthermore, with non-alignment outside of the UK on peat use, there will be a drastic decrease in UK production, leading to a catastrophic reduction in choice to British gardeners, a reduction in biodiversity the ability of the landscape industry to fulfil contracts for planting our green spaces.

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Our asks from Policy Makers to support the sustainable transition from peat use in horticulture:

- To deliver on a 2030 professional ban by:
 - review and full impact assessment of the ‘2026’ professional ban date intention
 - confirm professional 2030 date with exemptions, allowing enough seasonal trials to professionalise peat-free mixes for all plant species and varieties.
- To ensure clarity on delivery of end-2024 retail of sale for amateur use ban (i.e. all bagged compost to be peat-free) and recognise the retail sale and professional use are different.
- To ensure the transition away from peat keeps Britain’s horticulture and gardening industry globally competitive and on a level playing field with other horticultural markets and reflects the reality of our sector as one with significant global trading relationships in plants and plant products.
- To urgently communicate a timetable and detail on how the bans will work, including definitions of professional use, enforcement etc. There remain hugely significant unanswered questions, such as for professional landscapers.
- To provide increased R&D grant funding to conduct trials, access alternatives, and develop new peat-free supply chains.
- To work with European counterparts to minimise the risk of price inflation that shortages in stock combined with the increased cost of alternative growing media may cause.
- Access to grants to upgrade machinery largely incompatible with alternative growing media.
- Work with industry experts to facilitate knowledge exchange of expertise in peat-free growing.

A non-exhaustive list of **Species that do not perform well in peat free growing media mixes**

(Growing Media Taskforce, 2022)

Acers	Fungi (edible)	Narcissus
Anemone	Gaultheria	Pieris
Azalea deciduous & evergreen	Helianthemum	Rhododendron
Brassica	Hydrangea	Saxifraga
Bulbs (in general)	Hydrangea quercifolia	Skimmia
Calluna / Erica /Daboecia	Hydrangea villosa types	Tulip
Camelia	Kalmia	Vaccinium
Carex species	Lactuca sativa	Viburnum - deciduous types
Ceanothus	Libertia	Viburnum - some evergreen
Crinodendron types	Lithodora	
Daphne	Magnolia	

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