



Department
for Environment
Food & Rural Affairs

Ending the retail sale of peat in horticulture in England and Wales

December 2021

We are the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. We're responsible for improving and protecting the environment, growing the green economy, sustaining thriving rural communities and supporting our world-class food, farming and fishing industries.

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Horticultural.Peat@defra.gov.uk

www.gov.uk/defra

Contents

Introduction	5
Geographical scope.....	5
Body responsible for the consultation.....	5
Duration.....	5
Enquiries	5
How to respond.....	6
After the consultation	6
Compliance with consultation principles	6
Part 1: Context.....	7
Current policy and practice	8
England	8
Wales	8
Northern Ireland.....	9
Scotland	9
What do we hope to achieve?.....	9
Part 2: Consultation proposals.....	10
What are we proposing?.....	10
How are we proposing to make changes?.....	11
How to respond to the consultation	11
Part 3: Impact and call for evidence.....	12
Part 4: List of consultation questions	12
Consultation questions	12
About you	12
Business as usual; continuation of the voluntary approach.....	13

Mandatory reporting of the volume of peat sold (all sellers) 13

Ban the retail sale of peat and peat containing products 14

Point of sale bag charge for the purchase of any growing media bag containing peat 14

Annex A: Call for Evidence 16

Appendix: Definitions 16

Introduction

This consultation aims to address measures to end the use of peat and peat containing products in the retail sector in England and Wales.

We are seeking views on each of the proposed measures and how they could operate.

Call for evidence on the impacts of ending the use of peat and peat containing products in the professional horticulture and wider sectors.

Geographical scope

The preferred measure(s) could extend and apply to England and Wales.

This consultation has particular relevance to:

- Individuals or groups (for example, Environmental Non-Government Organisations) with an interest in peatland preservation and restoration
- Individuals or businesses who buy, sell, import and export peat and peat containing products
- Associations or organisations representing businesses or individuals who buy and sell peat and peat containing products
- Individuals or businesses that commercially extract peat

Body responsible for the consultation

This consultation is being carried out by the Defra's Soils and Peatlands team on behalf of the UK and Wales governments.

Duration

Consultation starts: 18 December 2021

Consultation ends: 18 March 2022

Enquiries

During the consultation, if you have any enquiries or wish to receive hard copies of the documents, please contact: Horticultural.Peat@defra.gov.uk

How to respond

The consultation can be completed online via: <https://consult.defra.gov.uk/soils-and-peatlands/endingtheretailsaleofpeatinhorticulture>

Or written responses (specifying which question(s) you are answering) can be submitted to:

Peat in Horticulture Consultation
Soils and Peatlands Team
Area SE
Seacole Building
2 Marsham Street
London
SW1P 4DF

If you are responding in Welsh, please respond by email or written response. Responses must be submitted by 18 March 2022.

After the consultation

Following the consultation period we will summarise the responses and publish this summary on our website at: <https://www.gov.uk/search/policy-papers-and-consultations>.

Copies of responses will be made available to the public on request. If you do not want your response – including your name, contact details and any other personal information – to be publicly available, please say so clearly in writing when you send your response to the consultation. Please explain why you need to keep details confidential. We will take your reasons into account if someone asks for this information under freedom of information legislation. But, because of the law, we cannot promise that we will always be able to keep those details confidential. Please note, if your computer automatically includes a confidentiality disclaimer, this will not count as a confidentiality request.

Compliance with consultation principles

This consultation is in line with the government's Consultation Principles. This can be found at: www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/resource-library/consultation-principlesguidance.

Part 1: Context

Peatlands are an iconic feature of our landscapes. They are the UK's largest stores of carbon. They also provide vital ecosystem services, such as supplying over a quarter of the UK's drinking water, decreasing flood risk, and providing food and shelter for rare wildlife. When peat is extracted, the carbon stored inside the bog is released as carbon dioxide, contributing to climate change. Peat extraction also degrades the state of the peat mass which threatens biodiversity and the efficacy of their ecosystem services across a larger area.

Peat is extracted in the UK for, primarily, horticultural purposes, with bagged retail growing media account for 70% of the peat sold in the UK. It serves other purposes, such as its role in whisky production, but these types of uses represent only a very small proportion of the total use of peat.

Retail growing media is frequently misused by consumers, for example being used as a soil improver rather than a medium in which to propagate plants. Dedicated soil improvers that do not contain peat are widely available and are much more effective.

Two thirds of the peat sold in the UK is imported from the rest of Europe. This means that our peat use is directly contributing to carbon emissions and habitat loss outside of the UK; we are exporting the carbon footprint.

The horticulture industry is making a conscious effort to transition to peat alternatives and is working closely with government to do so. However, progress in industry transitioning to peat-free alternatives has been slow. We have repeatedly stated that if the voluntary targets set in 2011 to phase out the use of peat and peat containing products in England did not succeed, that further measures would be considered. As we did not meet the voluntary target to end the use of peat in the amateur sector by 2020, further action by the government is now needed to ensure the horticulture industry continues to make progress in switching to peat alternatives, and to end the use of peat and peat containing products in that sector.

Industry stakeholders have this year created a taskforce focused on ending the use of peat as early as 2025 and no later than the end of 2028. A Responsibly Sourced Growing Media Scheme has also been launched. While these proposals by the industry are promising, further government action is needed to ensure the entire industry continues to make progress in switching to peat alternatives, thus ending the use of peat and peat containing products.

This consultation sets out measures to end the retail sale of peat and peat containing products, clearly demonstrating our commitment to protecting peatlands and our consideration of the positive impact that will have in helping to prevent climate change.

Current policy and practice

England

The UK government set voluntary targets in 2011, aiming for a peat-free amateur sector by 2020 and professional sector by 2030 in England.¹ Some significant progress was made, with the investment manufacturers and retailers made into peat alternatives starting to feed into the market: in 2019 the volume of peat sold in growing media was 2.06 million m³ compared with 2.76 million m³ in 2011. This represents a 25% decrease in the volume of peat sold in growing media from 2011 to 2019.² However, the volume of peat sold in the UK rose by 9% in 2020 due to unprecedented demand throughout the year with more people taking up gardening as a hobby during lock-down and the impact of the global pandemic on the supply chains for alternative materials.³

For many years now the government has engaged with industry stakeholders both formally and informally, including discussions in advance of the publication of the England Peat Action Plan within which the UK government announced its intention to end peat use by the end of the current parliament. This engagement has led to some degree of success; collaboration on industry initiatives, primarily with the Horticultural Trades Association and the Growing Media Association, and with large retailers acting in response to their own sustainability policies, has encouraged peat use reduction and increased public awareness around the use of peat.

Wales

Net Zero Wales has committed Wales to considering a sales ban for peat and peat containing products. Whilst there is no current peat extraction in Wales, preventing sales of peat containing products is in line with the 'Well-being of Future Generations Act' commitment to be globally responsible⁴. Wales' first National Peatland Action Programme (NPAP)⁵, launched in 2020, outlines a plan of action to be taken over five years under six priority themes. The Programme will target those peatlands most in need of restoration.

¹ [25-year-environment-plan.pdf \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#)

² [GMA | Research \(growingmedia.co.uk\)](#)

³ [GMA | Research \(growingmedia.co.uk\)](#)

⁴ <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/anaw/2015/2/contents/enacted>

⁵ <https://naturalresourceswales.gov.uk/about-us/strategies-and-plans/national-peatland-action-programme-2020-2025/?lang=en>

Northern Ireland

DAERA recognise that conservation and restoration of Northern Ireland's peatlands will be a key Nature-Based Solution to address the climate and biodiversity crises. DAERA recently consulted on a draft Peatland Strategy for Northern Ireland and one of the issues raised was the phasing out of peat in both the amateur and professional sectors. It is anticipated that DAERA will publish the final version of the Northern Ireland Peatland Strategy in 2022.

Scotland

The Scottish government is committed to taking forward work to develop and consult on a ban on the sale of peat related gardening products, the first step in their commitment to phase out the use of peat in horticulture. The Scottish government fundamentally recognises peatland restoration and conservation as a pivotal nature-based solution to mitigating and adapting to the twin crises of climate change and loss of biodiversity. They are a key component of Scotland's green recovery and just transition to net zero by 2045.

What do we hope to achieve?

We aim to end the retail sale of peat and peat containing products in England and Wales by the end of this Parliament and by 2028 in the professional horticulture sector. This will end greenhouse gas emissions from the extraction and use of peat domestically, contributing towards the governments net zero carbon emissions target, as well as ending the offshoring of our greenhouse gas emissions through using imported peat. This will also end an action which is continuing to degrade our peatlands and their archaeological and palaeo-environmental records and remove a significant barrier to these sites being restored to peat-forming habitats.

In doing so we want to see a thriving horticultural sector in England and Wales where growing media manufacturers and growers can compete within a level playing field whether the products are produced domestically or imported.

It is important to note that the market itself is currently undergoing change following company Bord na Mona (in Ireland) announcing in 2021 that they are ending peat extraction²⁰. Most of the peat sold in the UK is imported from Ireland. This will have significant impacts on the horticultural industry, particularly as there will be long waiting times and cost implications for importing peat from mainland Europe.

Part 2: Consultation proposals

The purpose of this consultation is to:

- Seek views on measures designed to end the sale of peat and peat containing products in the **retail sector** in England and Wales.
- Call for evidence on the impacts of ending the use of peat and peat containing products in the **professional** horticulture and wider sectors.

We recognise that there should be some narrowly defined exemptions to the proposed measures to end the use of peat and peat containing products in the **retail sector**, and these are considered in this consultation.

What are we proposing?

We are proposing a ban on the sale of peat and peat containing products (products that wholly or partially include peat) in the **retail sector**. Any ban will apply to domestic and imported peat, alike. We are also proposing consideration of other measures:

- Introducing point of sale measures for bagged growing media (a point-of-sale charge for the purchase of any growing media bag containing peat; and mandatory labelling and point of sale material containing detail of the environmental reasons for eschewing products containing peat).
- Mandatory reporting of the volume of peat sold for all sellers of peat and peat containing products.

The consultation also considers potential exemptions, including for scientific purposes and a maximum amount of peat allowed in certain products, which will need to be strictly defined and enforced to prevent exploitation. Even with these potential exemptions, any retail sales ban will help significantly reduce peat use and its extraction, which in turn will protect our peatlands.

It is not our intention to end the retail sale of peat containing products such as ornamental nursery stock, the professional sectors use of peat will be considered as part of our call for evidence.

Our proposed changes will not affect current licences for peat extraction – existing licenses in respect of this specific area will continue to apply. However, the proposed measures will affect the market for peat and peat containing products by inevitably causing the demand for peat to diminish.

Our proposed measures will apply to England and Wales. In order to assess the impact of these proposals on the UK internal market, we would welcome responses from individuals and organisations across the United Kingdom.

How are we proposing to make changes?

We propose to implement the described ban on the sale of peat and peat containing products through primary legislation, as soon as Parliamentary time allows.

How to respond to the consultation

Consultation questions are included in “Part 4: Consultation questions” in this document.

Please respond by 18th March 2022.

Please respond through the online survey (Citizen Space) accessible via Gov.uk.

Responses can also be sent by email to Horticultural.Peat@defra.gov.uk

or by post, specifying which question(s) you are responding to:

Peat in Horticulture Consultation
Soils and Peatlands Team
Area SE
2 Marsham Street
London
SW1P 4DF

This consultation is in line with the government’s Consultation Principles. This can be found at www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/resource-library/consultation-principles-guidance .

Representative groups are asked to give a summary of the people and organisations they represent and where relevant who else they have consulted in reaching their conclusions when they respond.

Information provided in response to this consultation, including personal data, may be published or disclosed in accordance with the access to information regimes these are primarily the Environmental Information Regulations 2004 (EIRs), the Freedom of Information Act 2000 (FOIA) and the Data Protection Act 2018 (DPA). We have obligations, mainly under the EIRs, FOIA and DPA, to disclose information to particular recipients or to the public in certain circumstances.

If you want the information that you provide to be treated as confidential, please be aware that, as a public authority, the Department is bound by the Freedom of Information Act and may therefore be obliged to disclose all or some of the information you provide. In view of this it would be helpful if you could explain to us why you regard the information you have provided as confidential. If we receive a request for disclosure of the information we will take full account of your explanation, but we cannot give an assurance that confidentiality can be maintained in all circumstances. An automatic confidentiality disclaimer generated by your IT system will not, of itself, be regarded as binding on the Department.

If you have any comments or complaints about the consultation process, please address them to:

Consultation Coordinator
Seacole Building
2 Marsham Street
London
SW1P 4DF

Or email: consultation.coordinator@defra.gov.uk

Part 3: Impact and call for evidence

Before we take any action, we want to fully understand the potential beneficial and adverse impacts to individuals, businesses and the natural environment, and any other affected sectors. We welcome evidence of the impact our proposals could have in these areas, particularly evidence on the scale of the impact and if there are any ways we can help around the development of peat-free alternatives.

Part 4: List of consultation questions

The consultation questions with background explanation are listed below. We would recommend that you answer the questions online, via this link:

<https://consult.defra.gov.uk/soils-and-peatlands/endingtheretailsaleofpeatinhorticulture>.

If you are responding in Welsh, please respond by email or written response posted to us. Please see the **Summary** section at the top of this document for more detail on alternative ways of responding to this consultation.

Consultation questions

About you

Question 1: Which of the following do you identify yourself as:

- Amateur gardener (for example, a user of horticulture products who does not sell any products etc.)
- Environmental body/NGO
- Growing media manufacturer
- Retailer selling bagged growing media
- Professional grower of horticulture
- Peat extractor

Question 2: Which territory/territories do you live in or, if applicable, does your business operate in?

Business as usual; continuation of the voluntary approach

Question 3. Our current approach consists of voluntary targets to end the use of peat in horticulture by 2020 for the amateur sector. Should we continue with the voluntary approach?

Question 4: If we were to revise the date for ending the use of peat in horticulture for the amateur sector, when should that date be?

Mandatory reporting of the volume of peat sold (all sellers)

While some retailers have engaged with government and responded positively to the voluntary target to end the use of horticultural peat, there are still many retailers for whom this issue is not a priority. When a retailer or company must report on an issue they have to monitor and understand how it affects their business, this requires greater engagement with the issue. Some retailers already track the volume of peat that they sell and are making efforts to reduce this year on year. Given the importance of peat to our climate and nature ambitions, we want to require sellers of horticultural products containing peat to publish their annual sales of peat (by volume). This will create pressure to act throughout the supply chain (making all parts take ownership of the issue) and increase the demand for peat-free products. This model of tracking and public reporting of an issue is being used by government to encourage behaviour change, for example, the model used by the Equality Act 2010 (Gender Pay Gap Information) Regulations 2017.

Question 5: Are you [responding on behalf of?] a business?

Question 6: Are you a business in the horticulture sector?

Question 7: How many employees are there in your organisation?

Question 8: Do you agree that retailers of horticultural peat should have access to information from their manufacturers about the amount of peat in the growing media bags they sell?

Question 9: Would you be able to assess the amount of peat in the different sizes of growing media that you sell? [If yes] How will you assess this?

Question 10: Should small and medium enterprises be given more time to adopt this measure? [If yes] How much more time should we give small and medium enterprises to adopt this measure?

Question 11: How feasible will it be for retailers of products that contain peat, for example potted plants, to obtain accurate information on how much peat is used within the potted plants?

Question 12: Should some retailers be exempt from reporting if they are selling less than a particular amount of peat per year? [If answered 'yes'] What amount should the threshold be in litres?

Question 13: Do you agree that this measure would encourage the horticulture industry to reduce their use of peat and peat containing products?

Question 14: Do you agree that this measure would help to raise awareness of issues around the use of horticultural peat?

Ban the retail sale of peat and peat containing products

The environmental concerns around peat use in horticulture have been ongoing since the 1990s and there is widespread frustration that the issue has yet to be resolved. We have concluded that the voluntary approach has not delivered. One of the key barriers to phasing out peat use in horticulture has been the lack of a level playing field and a perceived first mover disadvantage due to the increased price of alternatives compared to peat and increased production costs. This measure would level the playing field and ensure that further progress was made to end peat use. A ban on the sale of peat and peat containing products would apply to domestic and imported peat, alike.

Question 15: Do you think there should be a **retail** sales ban for peat and peat containing products in England and Wales?

Question 16: Will it be feasible to implement a sales ban for the **retail** sector by the end of this parliament (2024)?

Question 17: Are there industries other than the horticultural industry that will be severely affected by a ban of the **retail** sale of peat and peat containing products? [If 'yes'] which industries?

Question 18: Should there be any exemptions from such a ban?

Question 19: For potted plants and shrubs, what should be the maximum quantity of peat that should be exempt from a sales ban?

Point of sale bag charge for the purchase of any growing media bag containing peat

Bagged retail growing media accounts for 70% of the peat sold in the UK. For most consumers, the main factors influencing choice of growing media is the price and accessibility²⁴. Peat-free growing media is often more expensive than growing media containing peat, and so there is currently no financial incentive for consumers to choose peat-free growing media. This measure is aimed at overcoming the price differential by increasing the price of peat-based growing media.

This measure would mean all retailers selling growing media containing peat (or delivering growing media containing peat that originates from another country) will be required to apply

a point-of-sale (POS) charge to each bag of peat or growing media containing peat sold. This is not a tax and the money from the charge would not go to the government. Retailers would collect the charge at the till and would be encouraged to use the funds to pay for good causes, following the model of the plastic carrier bag charge. The level of the charge would be set to overcome the price differential between peat-based and peat-free growing media. It could apply to any product containing peat irrespective of the volume of peat in the product.

Question 20: Do you think that the measure to increase the price of growing media containing peat will have an impact on consumer behaviour?

Question 21: Would this measure encourage the sale of more peat-free alternative growing media?

Question 22: What would be an appropriate amount for the point-of-sale charge for a 50L bag of growing media containing peat per litre?

Question 23: Do you have a view on what retailers should do with the levy money raised through the point-of-sale bag charge?

Question 24: Do you believe there should be any exemptions to the point-of-sale charge? [If yes] How should we decide who should be exempt from the measure?

Question 25: In addition to the point-of-sale charge, do you think having mandatory labelling of growing media bags containing peat would have an impact on consumer behaviour?

Annex A: Call for Evidence

We aim to end the use of peat in horticulture, across all sectors, by 2028. In 2020, 30% of the peat sold in the UK was used by the professional sector (commercial growers of fruit, vegetables and plants).

This call for evidence seeks responses from a wide range of interested parties, including commercial growers of fruit and vegetables, growing media producers, academics, the public, consumer interest groups and businesses and their trade associations.

We will be particularly interested in hearing your views on:

- Technical barriers to replacing peat in growing media
- Availability and cost of peat alternatives
- The impact of imports of products from where peat use is permitted

We strongly encourage all interested parties to submit ideas on ending the use of peat in horticulture, and to provide evidence and data to support their views. You can upload any evidence and supporting documentation on this Citizen Space survey. Alternatively, you can email it to Horticultural.Peat@defra.gov.uk.

In addition, we will work with key stakeholders as part of an open process of engagement to support this call for evidence. We will use responses to this call for evidence to inform the development of policy recommendations to end the use of peat in horticulture in the professional sector.

Question 26: (Call for Evidence) Should we change the voluntary target for ending the use of peat and peat containing products to 2028 for the professional sector in England?

Question 27: (Call for Evidence) When would it be feasible to ban the sale of peat and peat containing products for the professional sector?

Appendix: Definitions

Growing Media: is used to describe the material used in a container to grow a plant⁹. Alternative terms that are also used are 'substrate' and 'potting soil'. In the UK some people still use the term 'compost' in the same context, however a compost is technically the product of a composting operation (e.g., the compost heap at the bottom of the garden) and can therefore be a misleading word to use. A composted material may be a component of a growing medium, but peat is not a product of composting and nor are many other ingredients used. Growing media are often formulated from a blend of different raw materials in order to achieve the correct balance of air and water holding capacity for the plants to be grown.

Soil Improvers: (or soil conditioners) are materials added to soil to improve its physical and/or chemical characteristics¹⁰. Soil improvers are generally used to improve the soil fertility by increasing the soil organic matter level. They improve the workability of the soil over time, for example making heavy clay soils more manageable and they can be used to improve the water holding capacity of light soils. There is no need for soil improvers to contain peat, and almost all soil improvers sold in the UK no longer do so¹¹.