



For peat's sake

Used to flavour whisky and sometimes as fuel, the UK's peat also provides an important service in the control of global warming. Mark Reed explains why he and Project Maya are trying to spread the word and get gardeners to take a peat-free pledge.

Imagine the outcry if a company was digging up top-soil from your local park to sell to gardeners. Yet most of us make no complaint about the excavation of peat from habitats that are just as valuable to us.

Gardeners like using peat because of its consistency and water-holding properties. But it wasn't until the 1970s that people started using peat in a big way. The greatest gardeners of history – people like John Tradescant and George Sinclair – made their own peat-free composts.

Weekend gardeners like me have no need to use peat-based compost and most have no idea of the damage we cause when we buy it.

Why peatlands matter

Peatlands are a vast green lung that breathe in and store carbon dioxide from the atmosphere while providing unique places for recreation and wildlife.

A loss of just 1.5 per cent of the world's peatlands releases the equivalent of all the carbon emissions humans create worldwide in a year. We need to keep that carbon

locked up under our feet, rather than digging it up and putting it on our gardens, from where most of it will be lost back to the atmosphere.

Your average 100-litre bag of peat compost takes around 100 years to develop, as plants absorb carbon dioxide from the atmosphere and turn it into leaves, stems and roots which are eventually laid down as peat. A bag this size will have absorbed as much carbon dioxide as you'd emit on a 240-mile car journey. Every month gardeners in the UK use enough peat to fill 69 Olympic swimming pools; that's more than 17,000 100-litre bags – a lot of car miles.

We have lost 94 per cent of our lowland raised peat bogs in the UK; yet despite having just 6,000 hectares left in good condition, peat extraction continues. That's not just an issue for climate change – it's a big problem for the many species that depend on these habitats.

So I teamed up with Project Maya to get the word out to more people about the importance of peat.

Project Maya and the peat-free pledge

Project Maya was set up by Dr Anna Evely and Dr Emily Lambert to create real-world impact from research (see *Planet Earth* Summer 2013, p17). As well as manufacturing Seedballs – a unique mix of wildflower seeds, peat-free compost and clay based on ancient seed-propagation techniques – Maya is a sustainability training academy which runs research and impact training and events.

Anna and I share research interests and we felt the time had come for a campaign to raise awareness of the benefits of peat-free gardening. The pledge is simple: it asks amateur gardeners to promise to use only peat-free compost. And, of course, the pledge webpage explains the science behind the benefits of going peat free.

Why go peat free?

For me the answers are really simple:

- You'll be protecting important wildlife and reducing your contribution to climate change.
- Peat-free composts are typically made using waste materials, reducing the amount of waste we send to landfill.
- You'll be supporting the UK peat-free compost industry and UK jobs, instead of overseas peat-extraction industries.
- You're unlikely to notice the difference: for most amateur gardeners the performance will be the same (though some like to adapt watering and feeding regimes to get the most out of peat-free composts).

If you're a serious gardener you might find it hard to avoid peat use completely – some plants will always prefer peat, like carnivorous plants and ericaceous (acid-loving) species. But you can mimic peat with specially-formulated ericaceous compost or by adding pine needles or bracken to your own compost to increase its acidity. Some enterprising hill farmers in the Lake District now sell peat-free compost made from bracken, as well as ericaceous compost made from local wool, which provides slow-release nitrogen and better water retention.

For me, it's a bit like the argument over low-energy light bulbs – we all knew they were good for the environment for years, but many of us didn't switch until high-energy ones were banned. For some of us that was because early low-energy light bulbs took ages to warm up, or we balked at the higher price – or just kept buying what we'd always bought out of habit. Early peat-free composts

To make your pledge go to:
www.mayaproject.org/peat-free-pledge

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Great sundew, *Drosera anglica*.

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often didn't perform well, and there were scare stories about people finding nails or glass in them, but these issues are now things of the past.

The only compromise is that peat-free composts do typically cost a bit more, and you have to read the labels: if it doesn't say 'peat-free' on the packaging, it probably contains peat.

Like low-energy light bulbs, if we don't start buying peat-free voluntarily, peat compost may eventually be banned. The government aims to phase out the use of peat by amateur gardeners in England by 2020. They are monitoring peat use and will be reviewing progress next year to see if further measures are needed.

Get involved

You can join organisations such as Friends of the Earth and celebrities such as Simon King and Vivienne Westwood by making your own peat-free pledge, and letting everyone you know why they should join you. Our peatlands are incredibly valuable. Let's keep them and our gardens beautiful.



Bog rosemary, *Andromeda polifolia*, a raised-bog specialist.

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