

Towards Sustainable Growing Media: the Work of the U.K.'s Sustainable Growing Media Task Force[©]

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The U.K. Government's Sustainable Growing Media Task Force has produced a roadmap for the future development of sustainable growing media in the U.K. Widely acknowledged as both perceptive and accurate and offering pragmatic solutions, the task force chairman's report *Towards sustainable growing media* (Knight, 2012) has been welcomed by all sides of the horticultural industry in the U.K. This paper discusses the key points that have emerged from the task force's work.

INTRODUCTION

The Sustainable Growing Media Task Force was established following the publication of the U.K. Government's Natural Environment White Paper in June 2011. It is made up of representatives from 35 organisations from across the growing-media supply chain, including retailers, growing media manufacturers, and growers and includes other stakeholders such as environmental organisations. It is chaired by Dr. Alan Knight OBE and overseen by a steering group and was tasked with producing a plan for achieving sustainable supply and use of growing media within U.K. horticulture. It has been commonly agreed that Dr. Knight's analysis of the state of both the growing media and the wider horticultural industry in the U.K. is both accurate and insightful.

At a meeting of the task force and other interested parties held in September 2012, chaired jointly by the Horticultural Development Council, the National Farmers Union, and the Horticultural Trades Association, there was broad agreement that the report provided "a pragmatic and balanced summary of the environmental, social, and economic factors in the complicated debate on the sustainability of growing media." During the previous 12 months, the task force identified several project streams which will help deliver a competitive and prosperous U.K. horticultural industry that is based on a responsibly sourced and resilient supply of growing media.

The task force has taken a broad approach to the subject of growing media, looking at all growing medium ingredients rather than focussing simply on peat. It was however, the case against peat, as highlighted by conservation organisations since the late 1980s that drove the government's involvement in the issue. The benefits of peat for horticulture are well known; principally that it is consistent, available, cheap, and effective. But for some, the cost to nature and the environment is too high and there is a clear consensus that no peat should be sourced from pristine or high quality peat habitats.

Until relatively recently the lack of effective alternatives to peat has hampered reduction in peat use, but as better products emerge the picture is changing. There is an emerging viewpoint that the U.K. industry has been over-reliant on peat as the sole raw material for growing media and that the use of a wider range of materials will create a greater commercial resilience. This was particularly relevant in 2012 because peat harvests had been severely reduced by high rainfall in most of the peat producing areas within Europe.

OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

The report acknowledges that a focus on sustainability brings both opportunities and challenges and that some of the changes required may be difficult. Sustainability is not easy and the science can be ambiguous. It is suggested by the report's author that complete clarity on the case against peat may never be forthcoming and that those who are looking for this might rather consider how to face up to the ambiguity.

The report proposes a plan for the future development of growing media. The plan was

created as a result of the work of the task force and has its backing. It includes the following proposals:

- Completion of the defining of sustainability criteria for all growing media ingredients and integration of this into an auditable industry scheme.
- Development of a 5-year R&D plan to address commercial horticulture's technical concerns.
- Promotion and transfer of information generated by nursery growing media trials.
- Raising awareness of the issues around growing media sustainability with the landscape specifier and contractor sector.
- Development of procurement guidance for public sector landscape tenders.
- Strengthened links and co-operation with European partners to ensure a level European playing field.
- Development of a performance standard for amateur bagged media.
- Further retailer and consumer education through funded programmes and improved labelling.
- Working with Environment Agency to remove regulatory barriers hampering use of waste materials within growing media.
- Establishment of a working group to oversee progress against the plan.

The definition of sustainability criteria for all growing medium ingredients is one of the key projects within the plan. Economic, social, and environmental criteria have been defined as the basis for a system that will assess the sustainability of a material, ultimately giving users access to information which will enable them to assess whether using the material achieves their own environmental objectives.

The scheme needs further development but one of its strengths is that for the first time, peat will be assessed equally alongside all other ingredients. The sustainability criteria include:

- Availability
- Renewability
- Social/ethical impacts
- Energy inputs
- Water inputs
- Impact on ecosystems
- Carbon/climate change impacts
- Resource security
- Economy

The Sustainable Growing Media Task Force has made very good progress in the few months since its creation and there is enthusiasm from all its members to ensure that the momentum is maintained. The result will be a resilient and sustainable industry from which the whole of the horticultural and gardening industries can benefit.

Literature Cited

Knight, A. 2012. Towards sustainable growing media. Chairman's report and roadmap, Defra, London, U.K. www.defra.gov.uk/peat-taskforce.