

For peats sake

Susan Norman on the big switch to peat-free at Conquest Plant Nursery

In the summer of 2013 the post arrived at the nursery as normal, sometimes an hour earlier; sometimes an hour later but what was different was the glaring headline on the front cover of a large compost supplier newsletter flyer. "The Government deadline for the elimination of peat use by public sector bodies is looming". This was then illustrated with an image of a clock ticking showing 2015 – not that far away!

We had been talking about going peat free on and off over the last few years and had even done some trials some years ago when it was first mooted and The National Trust decided overnight they weren't stocking plants grown in peat. Besides which we like to be a bit conservation and wildlife friendly. Unfortunately, this early trial had been unsuccessful with plenty of lush growth on top but little root action underneath, a nightmare to water and feed and so we had resorted back to our peat mix compost.

So what was different this time? The image on the flyer certainly captured our attention and with us growing a majority of shrubs we needed to allow time for plants to root in time for 2015. Our local supplier had mislaid our compost formula and our compost mix had never been quite the same, besides which the wetter winters were causing saturated pots on our standing beds preventing adequate drainage for plants roots.

After attending a trade show and visiting a number of compost supplier exhibits for research it was evident that major advances had been made in the last few years to provide more consistent peat free compost and we made our decision to go peat free starting from last year. We decided to use the company Melcourt and their Sylvamix® Special compost a mixture of composted bark fines and coir, incorporating a slow release feed and a bioinsecticide for vine weevil control. The reason for choosing this compost is that it doesn't contain green waste which can sometimes result in inconsistent quality of compost and plant growth. After all our cuttings supplier was using the same Sylvamix® compost and we hadn't noticed any lack of quality.

We started trialling it on herbaceous perennials. The results were amazing, vibrant foliage, good root action in almost the same time as before and really healthy plants. This was also emphasised by the public's comments and reaction at plant fairs last year. We then moved onto potting herbs which appear to love the free drainage compost and have produced the best herb plants we have ever grown. Towards late summer last year we potted our shrubs (excluding acid (ericaceous) loving shrubs) into peat free compost and all are showing similar results which should be ready in time for our plant fairs this year.

Did we make the right decision – we think so? This professional peat free compost has proved to have many advantages besides producing excellent growing results. We have



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found it light to use and this means pots are lighter for general handling and to load the van for plant fairs than peat or loam based compost. Weeding has been reduced and there is less moss and liverwort on top of the pots due to the better porosity of the compost making a tidier looking plant. The biggest change has been in re-educating ourselves in how to water plants grown in peat free compost because although the plant may look dry on the top of the pot and the pot itself is generally lighter it doesn't necessarily mean that it is in need of water. Having that inch of dryness on the top of the pot does help to reduce weed seed, moss and liverwort growth and because of the peat free compost structure it is naturally free draining so will only hold sufficient water to sustain the plant - easily checked by randomly tapping the plant out of the pot. Less water and more often appears to be the way which means you don't waste water by having it run out of the pots or leeching fertiliser. If the pots do become dry they re-wet easily. For the small nursery it is available in smaller bulk quantities making it ideal, as well as supplying the needs of the larger scale nursery.



"No moss and liverwort".

So why am I telling you about this? You would think we were receiving a commission, which we are not. It's because we are so impressed with this product we thought we would let you into a secret that Melcourt have also launched professional peat free compost called SylvaGrow® specifically for the amateur passionate gardener to use. So if you like the way our plants grow and whatever your reason for changing to peat free compost whether to reduce the environmental impact on peat bogs, grow better plants, provide better plant drainage or like the fact you are using a sustainable product why not enquire at your local compost supplier and you can be growing plants as good as ours. We look forward to hearing your comments at future plant fairs.

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