# RHS delays peat ban at Chelsea Flower Show amid sustainability concerns



The annual RHS Chelsea Flower Show, held each May in London, has long been a benchmark for the finest in British garden design and cultivation. This year, however, the show faces criticism for its lack of progress towards sustainability, particularly around the use of peat in horticulture. Originally, the Royal Horticultural Society (RHS) committed to eliminating peat from its operations by the end of this year, a pledge made in 2021 in recognition of the urgent need to protect carbon-rich peatlands. However, this commitment has been delayed; nurseries will now be allowed to sell plants partially grown in peat until 2028.

Clare Matterson, the RHS's new director-general, attributed this setback to "complex supply chains" and a "legislative black hole." These factors reveal systemic challenges within the industry that hinder immediate shifts to sustainable practices. Previously, the UK government had indicated plans to outlaw the sale of peat products for amateur gardening by 2024, with commercial restrictions to follow in 2026. However, as of now, these legislative actions have not materialised, and peat continues to represent 43 per cent of the growing media used by professionals, according to the Horticultural Trade Association. Notably, every one of the 39 show gardens at last year’s Chelsea was built using some peat.

Garden designer Jack Wallington expressed disappointment over the RHS's reversal, suggesting that the move caters to corporate sponsors rather than environmental imperatives. While some, like Sally Nex from the Peat-free Partnership, acknowledge RHS's efforts, they also recognise the wider industry's resistance to change.

Peatlands are invaluable ecosystems, acting as significant carbon sinks and providing crucial water filtration and flood prevention. The UK comprises approximately 3 million hectares of various types of peatland, yet 80 per cent is in a degraded state, releasing around 20 million tonnes of greenhouse gases annually. This alarming statistic underscores the critical need for restoration and preservation as part of the UK’s commitment to achieve net-zero emissions by 2050.

The reliance on peat began in the 1960s, when its lightweight and moisture-retaining properties made it ideal for mass production in nurseries. However, the environmental consequences of peat mining became clear by the late 1980s, leading to the establishment of the Peatland Campaign, which sought to halt peat usage in horticulture. Despite significant challenges, some nurseries, such as Great Dixter, have successfully transitioned to peat-free alternatives. Great Dixter, which has been peat-free since the early 2000s, mixes compost by hand, utilising loam from its own meadows alongside wood fibre, bark, and slow-release fertilisers.

Mark Straver of Hortus Loci, another nursery that has been peat-free for five years, shared that the initially poor quality of peat-free products hindered their adoption. However, over time, these alternatives have significantly improved, helping Straver and others gain confidence in peat-free cultivation. "If the plants we grow get gold medals at Chelsea, how bad can it be?" he questioned, reflecting a more positive outlook on alternative growing media.

Kernock Park Plants, a prominent supplier of peat-free plugs, has been transforming its practices over the last few years. Managing Director Bruce Harnett noted that despite initial difficulties and plant losses during the transition, the nursery now grows all of its 1,200 varieties without peat. The shift required careful trials and adjustments, highlighting the complexity involved in moving away from such a deeply entrenched material.

Not all stakeholders are optimistic, however. Kenneth Cox, managing director of Glendoick Garden Centre in Scotland, has struggled to find viable peat-free alternatives for certain acid-loving plants like rhododendrons. He expressed skepticism about the feasibility of a 100 per cent peat-free approach, although there are encouraging signs from other nurseries producing promising results.

The RHS remains committed to its overarching strategy of promoting sustainable gardening practices, having invested £2.5 million and over 150,000 hours into research aimed at facilitating the industry's transition away from peat. Alistair Griffiths, head of science at the RHS, highlighted ongoing partnerships with growers and media producers to trial alternatives, focusing on methods that can sustain plant health without peat.

Despite the challenges and mixed results across the industry, various initiatives, such as the RHS Chelsea Sustainable Garden Product of the Year, which awarded Lindum Wildflower Turf for its eco-friendly practices, indicate a growing awareness of the importance of sustainability in garden design.

As public consciousness surrounding environmental issues rises, the pressure on the horticulture industry to adapt is mounting. While the RHS actively advocates for legislative change, delivering on its own promises and fostering industry-wide reform remains a significant challenge. As Wallington poignantly remarked, the industry must confront not only its reliance on peat but also the myriad other environmental issues it currently faces. "We need to move on," he stated, emphasising that the dialogue surrounding sustainability in gardening cannot afford to stagnate as the world grapples with climate change.

### Reference Map

1. Paragraphs 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12
2. Paragraphs 1, 4, 7
3. Paragraph 2
4. Paragraph 5
5. Paragraph 5, 8
6. Paragraph 12
7. Paragraph 9, 10, 11

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.ft.com/content/8f97230a-ea34-42c2-9456-ac2299289cae> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.ft.com/content/8f97230a-ea34-42c2-9456-ac2299289cae> - The article discusses the Royal Horticultural Society's (RHS) commitment to sustainability at the Chelsea Flower Show, highlighting the challenges in eliminating peat-based plants. Despite plans to phase out peat by 2025, the RHS has postponed this target to 2028 due to complex supply chains and legislative issues. The piece also examines the environmental impact of peat extraction, the success of nurseries like Great Dixter in adopting peat-free practices, and the broader industry efforts to transition to sustainable alternatives.
3. <https://www.rhs.org.uk/advice/peat/rhs-peat-free> - The RHS has committed to being 100% peat-free by 2025, as part of its efforts to promote sustainability in horticulture. This initiative involves trialing alternative responsibly sourced growing media, such as farmed sphagnum moss, to reduce the environmental impact of peat extraction. The RHS has already stopped selling peat-based compost and aims to ensure all plants sold in its retail outlets and displayed at shows are peat-free by 2025.
4. <https://www.gardensillustrated.com/chelsea/sustainable-garden-product-winner> - Lindum Wildflower Turf was awarded the RHS Chelsea Sustainable Garden Product of the Year 2023. This product is notable for being grown without plastic matting, using peat-free and recycled compost. It supports a diverse range of pollinators and insects with its 27 species of wildflowers, perennials, and herbs, all native to the UK, aligning with the RHS's focus on promoting eco-friendly and ethical consumerism within the gardening sector.
5. <https://www.greatdixter.co.uk/about/caring-for-nature/> - Great Dixter, a renowned nursery, has been peat-free since 2007, emphasizing environmental sustainability in its operations. The nursery grows the majority of its plants without peat, collects its own seeds, and produces over 20 tonnes of compost annually. It also practices water conservation using borehole water, manages woodlands sustainably, and recycles widely throughout the estate, reflecting a comprehensive approach to caring for nature.
6. <https://www.aspens.org.uk/news/aspens-selected-to-create-show-garden-for-2023-rhs-chelsea-flower-show> - Aspens, a charity supporting individuals with autism and learning disabilities, was selected to create a garden for the 2023 RHS Chelsea Flower Show. The 'Natural Affinity Garden' emphasizes sustainability, with all plants and hard landscaping sourced locally. The majority of the planting was supplied by a peat-free nursery, and the remaining plants came from an off-grid nursery, highlighting the integration of environmental considerations in garden design.
7. <https://www.dalefootcomposts.co.uk/latest-news/news/2022/5/the-bog-has-landed-a-gold-medal-dalefoot-puts-peatland-on-display-at-rhs-chelsea-to-highlight-how-gardeners-can-protect-landscapes-by-switching-to-peat-free-composts.aspx> - Dalefoot Composts, in collaboration with the Eden Project, showcased a slice of restored Cumbrian peatland at the RHS Chelsea Flower Show, winning a gold medal. The exhibit aimed to highlight the environmental damage caused by peat extraction and promote the use of peat-free composts among gardeners. The immersive display allowed visitors to experience the sounds and beauty of peatlands, emphasizing the importance of protecting these critical ecosystems.