

Making the transition to peat-free growing media



Rosewarne Nursery based at Duchy College near Camborne in Cornwall has made the transition from growing plants in a peat-based to a completely peat-free compost mix. John Ashton explains some of the benefits and hindrances that have come from using the mix in the nursery which had a turnover of about 32,000 plants the previous year.



John in the potting shed

“Last November was when we really started using the peat-free mixture after running a series of trials during the year growing different varieties of plants. We grew some in peat-based compost and some in peat-free to look at the difference in growth.”

“The main benefits of using the peat-free mix seem to be that the plants are ‘cleaner’, with very little weeds and they don’t get liverwort. We have been so short staffed that the cleanliness of the plants was a big priority for me, we haven’t got time to clean plants, so the switch to using it has helped a lot. Plus the stock looks cleaner and tidier.” John explains that the nursery supplies garden centres and landscapers, *“it’s great as they can come in and just pick the plants up, I don’t have to clean them first.”*

He goes on to say *“I mix a wetting agent in so that the mixture holds the water more effectively. The peat mixture did tend to stay very wet and we found that the top of the peat didn’t dry out that quickly whereas the peat free does...”*



The peat-free mix that they are now using (see below) is Melcourt Sylvamix® peat-free growing media (nursery stock), a free draining all-round potting mix for a range of uses. The custom-made base mix consists of: 60% Sylvafibre® (fine composted wood-fibre designed to be a major growing medium ingredient, ideal for peat free or peat reduced plant production), 20% Growbark® mixed conifer (fine, matured, mixed conifer bark designed as a major growing medium ingredient and recommended as being an ideal additive to peat and its alternatives), and 20% coir.



John explains that he buys the mixture in bulk in 2,500 litre bales (it works out slightly cheaper than peat to buy in bulk), and in addition to the wetting agent, he mixes in a vine weevil control, a controlled release fertiliser (Osmocote Pro) and a biological control (Met 52).

John comments on some of the visual differences *“I have noticed that the growth of plants in the peat-free mix is different, particularly with plants like Hebes and*



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Euphorbias (see below). It seems to produce bushier plants. In peat they go quite leggy quite quickly, and become very lush. There is a noticeable difference in the distances between leaf axils; they're much shorter in the peat-free. Plants in the peat-free also grow a little bit slower to begin with but I can cope with that because the plants by the end are in good shape - with a nice level of bushiness."



Euphorbias in the multi-span glasshouse

John points out that there are some down-sides from growing plants in the peat-free mix, "because it's so free draining the more you water the more feed can leach out of the mix, which can be a bit annoying." He has noticed that some plants in particular don't grow so well in it "Olearias don't particularly like it - especially over the summer when they tend to dry out really quickly so need a lot of water. Hydrangeas also struggle - maybe it's because they can't get enough water."

In addition to the incentives of cleanliness of stock and a reduction in the spread of weeds, moss and liverworts, John explains that "peat is going to be withdrawn from horticulture in a few years - I wanted to get ahead so decided to look in to it. I'm hoping it's going to be a bit of a selling point but no-one has commented on it yet."

If you are interested in finding out more about what Melcourt do click [here](#).