

Garden Organic tackles the UK's tea bag mountain

It's a well-known fact that us Brits love our tea, but did you know that we drink 165 million cups of tea a day?¹ That's a lot of teabags going to waste.

This International Compost Awareness Week (1-7th May) Garden Organic will be helping to redirect many of these teabags onto compost heaps by running compost training sessions along the length and breadth of the UK.

We will be enlisting the help of our Master Composters and Master Gardeners to deliver short, simple training sessions during the week, with the aim to empower non-composters with the knowledge and inspiration they need to start.

"For most organic gardeners, home composting is a no-brainer," commented David Garrett, Garden Organic's Composting Guru, "but we know there are millions of

people out there who don't compost, simply because they don't know how. International Compost Awareness Week (ICAW) is the perfect opportunity to share our knowledge. Think of all that lovely compost we could create!"

If you would like to run a session in your local area, we would love to hear from you. You don't need to be an expert in composting as full resources will be provided - you just need bags of enthusiasm and a passion for compost! Please email Suzi Archer on sarcher@gardenorganic.org.uk to register your interest.

Find your local session and keep up to date with our ICAW special offers by visiting www.gardenorganic.org.uk/compost-week. This page will be updated regularly so please check back often.

1. UK Tea and Infusions Association
www.tea.co.uk/tea-facts

Open gardens return for 2016

We are once again calling for members willing to open their organic gardens to help raise awareness of Garden Organic. Each year, committed organic growers support us by opening their gardens to the public. This is a perfect way to celebrate and show organic gardening at its best whilst increasing awareness of Garden Organic and helping to raise vital funds to support our work.

If you would like to discuss the possibility of opening your garden for Garden Organic, please contact Anne Durant, Fundraising Co-ordinator, on 024 7630 3517 or by emailing



Geraldine Stenson

Bob Flowerdew urges you to 'Really help your plants'

cropping by the pollen from sweet corn, or how the unbroken-down residues of a prior crop can seriously reduce the germination of the next.

The e-book is available to download now, search Amazon for "Really Help Your Plants"

Bob Flowerdew is one of Garden Organic's ambassadors and will be appearing at our AGM and Members' Day this year. For more details please see the accompanying article 'AGM heads east' overleaf.



Introducing Croydon's first Food Buddies



Croydon's first Food Buddies are now trained and ready to share their enthusiasm for good-for-you meals.

They are conveying the message that adding some home-grown goodness to your diet doesn't need to be tricky. Anyone can have a mini-garden on their windowsill, and small additions like herbs, shoots and sprouts can make a huge taste difference.

Food Buddies will be out and about at Croydon events this year, with recipe cards, herbs to taste, and sharing their ideas to include fresh veg and fruit in your diet. They'll also be demonstrating just how easy it can be to get growing at home.

If you'd like a Food Buddy at your event, or think you might like to be a Food Buddy yourself, please get in touch with Liza Scholfield, Master Gardener Volunteer Regional Co-ordinator, by emailing lscholfield@gardenorganic.org.uk.

Peat-free growing – where are we now?

By Judith Conroy, organic gardener

Our nation's gardens are increasingly recognised for their importance to wildlife – from bees and butterflies to birds and hedgehogs. But amidst this heightened awareness of biodiversity, it seems perverse that our precious peat habitats are still being plundered to serve these very same gardens.

Peat bogs

Peat is most commonly extracted from lowland raised bogs; unique habitats formed over millennia. When sphagnum moss dies, the acidic, waterlogged conditions prevent it from completely breaking down and it slowly accumulates as peat. Peat forms at a typical rate of just 1 mm per year so a 30 cm layer can take 300 years to form. This means it is not renewable in any meaningful sense; it is more accurately described as a young fossil fuel.

Is peat use being phased out?

In 2010, the Government set targets to phase out peat from the amateur gardening market by 2020, and from professional horticulture by 2030. But these are voluntary goals that rely on action by the industry itself, which has little incentive. Mining peat is a relatively cheap and easy way to fill bags for garden centres. A Sustainable Growing Media Task Force was set up in 2011, and the industry has responded

happens at most of these sites and we also import peat extracted in other countries.

Peat landscapes store vast quantities of carbon, and when they are drained and mined exposure to the air triggers decomposition and tonnes of carbon dioxide gas (a major contributor to global warming) are released into the atmosphere. Lowland raised bogs also ease flooding by storing, then slowly releasing rainwater.

by developing a new scheme, which aims to ensure the responsible sourcing and manufacturing of growing media. This scheme is due to be launched this year, and we are also awaiting a government review on the progress that has been made on this important issue.

We have not always gardened with peat. When ready-mixed composts were first sold in the 1940s, peat featured as an ingredient. But it was not until the 1970s that high-percentage peat products came in. Peat became popular because it is cheap and behaves in a predictable way. It is a bit of a 'one-size-fits-all' material, but is not by any means the perfect growing medium. It has to undergo various adjustments before it is suitable for use - the very low (acid) pH has to be brought up, wetting agents are added (if peat completely dries out, it is very difficult to re-wet), and, as it contains virtually no food - nutrients have to be added.



Curlew by iStock/Zzvet



Sundew by iStock/Eric Trampe

Buying peat-free compost will help to protect a wealth of wildlife – from curlews to sundews!

Buying peat-free composts

The good news is that it is increasingly possible to get your hands on good, 'peat-free' compost. In the past, there have been problems with the quality, consistency and availability of some peat-free blends, but this has improved considerably in recent years. In a Gardening Which? trial, published in spring 2015, two out of the three composts given their 'Best Buy' rating were 100% peat-free. These were: Fertile Fibre's Multipurpose Compost (coir based) and Melcourt's Sylvagrow (bark/wood fibre based), which is also endorsed by the RHS.

The majority of garden centres now stock at least one peat-free brand, but this doesn't reflect the choice that is out there. A wider range, including an ericaceous mix, can be purchased online. Delivery may be costly or subject to minimum amounts, so it's a good idea to arrange a bulk order with your neighbours, friends or fellow allotment holders. If your garden centre does not appear to have peat-free compost, do still ask. At the very least, you will be highlighting the demand.

- 'Reclaimed Peat' such as Moorland Gold is different. It is collected by filtering water that contains naturally eroded peat, and is acceptable under the Organic Gardening Guidelines.
- 'Organic' does not mean that a compost is peat-free, and the word 'organic' can also be used in the context of 'organic matter'.
- The EU Ecolabel for growing media, soil improvers and mulch excludes products that contain peat. But unfortunately there are still not enough brands of growing media in the UK that carry this label.

Many peat alternatives have the added advantage of being waste products:

- Composted bark - a by-product of the forestry industry.
- Coir - a natural fibre from coconut husks. Though it comes from tropical regions, the carbon footprint is reduced by slow transportation by boat in a dried, compressed state. The carbon dioxide output is still far less than that of peat.
- Green waste - produced from the large-scale composting of materials such as garden wheelie bin contents. The best quality comes with a 'PAS100' certificate.

Blending your own

Before the days of peat and ready-made composts, gardeners made their own successful compost blends. We can do this too - using simple ingredients from the garden:

- Leaf mould - a fantastic ingredient containing fungi beneficial to plant roots. It can be ready for use after a year or two, depending on the leaves, and is great in potting mixes. Its low nutrient content makes it ideal for seed compost.
- Garden compost - moderately high in nutrients, and can be combined with leaf mould in different proportions depending on the intended use.
- Worm compost - an excellent ingredient for hungrier plants, or as a top dressing for established pots.
- Good quality soil (loam) - is a good base for composts when plants are going to be kept in pots for the longer term.

These natural materials release nutrients steadily over a long period as the organic matter they contain breaks down slowly. Nettle and comfrey liquids can be used to supplement particularly hungry plants or those left in pots for longer periods (see www.gardenorganic.org.uk/comfrey).

Leading the way

More and more professional growers are using peat-free compost. Delfland Nurseries has been supplying peat-free, organic plug plants since 2011. Recently, the company sold a Heritage Tomato Collection, using varieties from our Heritage Seed Library. I asked Jill Vaughan, joint owner and director, about their use of peat-free compost:

Q What made you decide to grow in peat-free media?

A The ethics; there are alternatives to peat that are available to us and we should be using them wherever possible. There is a demand for peat-free plants and we found that customers like the National Trust were asking for them.

Q Have you tried many different brands over the years?

Leaf mould is perfect for potting mixes.



Judith Conroy

A Delfland tomato seedling grown in a peat-free plug



A Yes, quite a few. But in recent years, the quality and consistency of peat-free and peat-reduced composts have improved a lot. We conducted a trial (supported by the Soil Association) in 2013 of nine different blends. Several peat-free composts in the trial gave good results including the blend of coir and green waste that we were already using.

Q What advice would you give to gardeners?

A No single compost can do everything. You need to be observant and prepared to pot on plants, feed them or add other ingredients to the mix. However, I would recommend the Sylvagrow or the Fertile Fibre range, which is also approved by the Soil Association.

Conclusions

Despite what the aisles of pallets at garden centres might imply, increasing numbers of professionals and amateurs alike are growing their plants of choice very successfully without so much as a crumb of peat. Lack of good compost is no longer a barrier to peat-free success and the more we ask for it, the more incentive compost manufacturers have to innovate and further improve their formulations.

For more useful information visit Garden Organic's:

- 'I Don't Dig Peat' website www.idontdigpeat.org.uk/
- Master Composters' website www.homecomposting.org.uk
- Growing advice web pages www.gardenorganic.org.uk/peat-free-growing