

A peat ban now makes no sense for gardeners – or the planet

Our columnist discusses hot topics and shares top tips for nurturing seedlings and keeping garden pests at bay

By [Bunny Guinness](#) 19 February 2022 • 5:00am



Bunny gets busy potting up this season's seedlings CREDIT: Andrew Crowley
Bunny Guinness is a qualified landscape architect and has a doctorate in horticulture from Reading University. Bunny has also been a panellist on BBC Radio 4 *Gardeners' Question Time* since 1998 and has written a regular column for Telegraph Gardening since 2000, in which she covers hot horticultural topics of the day and a wide range of seasonal gardening tasks.

Why the proposed peat ban will be detrimental

I am immensely concerned that Defra is planning to ban retail peat use by 2024 and all use by 2029 – a far-reaching decision for the horticulture industry – based on muddled thinking. Social media is demonising the use of peat, but this ban will be hugely detrimental to the planet, to gardeners and to the horticultural industry.

The late Peter Seabrook gathered signatories for an open letter that was passed to MPs requesting an open debate on the issue. Signatories included many champions from all walks of horticulture. Now the Government is in the process of consulting the industry; this closes on March 18.

Few people fully understand the peat arguments. First, just a miniscule proportion, 0.053 per cent of the three million hectares of peat in the UK, is used for horticultural extraction. The biggest land use – nearly half – remains under semi-natural peatland vegetation. But this has been affected by human activities. These

include drainage, burn management, the cutting of peat for fuel and livestock grazing. That leaves only 22 per cent of peat in near-natural condition. Around 300 times the area used for horticulture is drained and used for conifer plantations. A similar amount is in agricultural use, ie cropped and grazed. Surely it would be more effective to regulate these more profligate uses?



The quality of peat alternatives is not yet good enough CREDIT: Andrew Crowley
The second important argument against a peat ban is that peat substitutes are just not as good for growing plants. Peat has, as yet, unrivalled properties for holding water and also drainage. It is no longer recommended, quite rightly, as a soil improver or a mulch. But for seeds, cuttings and potting composts it is generally considered the best.

Our competitors in the horticulture industries across the channel are expected to double their use of peat by 2050. Only the UK, Germany and Switzerland are proposing a ban.

Substitutes such as coir (coconut fibre) are imported from South East Asia. This has a high salt content and must be washed through with fresh water – a very scarce resource in the countries where coir originates. Other substitutes are waste materials with high plastic contamination. These may well cause more environmental damage. Additionally, these substitutes do not hold water so well, so to compensate, more fertiliser is required, which is then washed through more quickly with the extra water applications.

As for sustainability, Canadian peat companies that supply all of north America are extracting peat more slowly than the rate at which it is laid down. Furthermore, restoration of peat bogs is a very much part of the British industry. Pat Walls of Bulrush Horticulture (bulrush.co.uk) has done much pioneering work with bog

restoration. Following the removal of the top 2-3 metres of peat (leaving a metre or so), the water table is raised and then recolonised with moss.

Pat points out that much damage was done by previous generations who hand-dug their way around the edges of raised bogs, which then affected the water table, allowing heather, birches and other plants to come in, leading to a slow decline. Much work is needed to restore and manage these sensitive habitats. To that end, Keith Nicholson from Westland Horticulture explains that the company has spent more than £40 million since 2005 developing its complete range to be peat-free and peat-reduced.

However, the proposed ban is far too soon. There is just not enough non-peat substrate of sufficient quality to replace the 2 million cubic metres of peat we use each year.

Let us hope the Government is aware of the pressures placed on horticultural producers in the UK by the ban on peat.

How to pest-proof your garden

I have just invested £19.38 in a 150ft-long, 6ft-wide roll of scaffold netting (scaffolding-direct.co.uk). This year, I am going to ensure that I have rich pickings from my brassicas, leeks, rocket and other vulnerable vegetables. The only way to do this without resorting to chemicals is to cover them – and horticultural covers are pretty expensive.

The holes in this netting (designed to stop debris from building sites plummeting from great heights onto unfortunates below) are around a millimetre, so it will keep off butterflies, leek moth, flea beetles, pigeons and more. I shall either support it on hoops or throw the netting directly over the crop.

You have to be careful with the latter approach, though, as you will often see butterflies sitting on leaves that touch or poke through the netting and then laying their eggs, which will subsequently produce many very hungry caterpillars.



Scaffold netting is a cheap and cheerful way of protecting plants from various 'enemies' CREDIT: Andrew Crowley

I have made all sorts of hoops of various sizes. Some were supplied by a metalworker, who has made me ornamental, acid-etched versions complete with mini decorative finials. Some I have made using alkathene pipe cut to the size I need to produce an arch of the right height. I then insert a stout cane or stick in each end and push them into the ground. It works a treat.

The scaffold netting comes in many colours: yellow, blue, white and black. I have opted for white, as, although more conspicuous than black, it will let through and scatter more light than the black version. This is especially important on the denser nettings.

How to sow seeds – tips and tricks to know

My kitchen windowsills are overflowing, as are others around the house. When you get a full tray of seedlings that pop up a couple of weeks after sowing, it is always so heartening to see.

I sowed more broad beans three weeks ago – the first mangetout broad bean, from Suttons, called ‘Statissa’. You can eat the young beans complete with pod when just a few weeks old, or wait and pick and shell as usual. I have eaten some of the “normal” varieties of broad beans in the mangetout style, too, but apparently ‘Statissa’ have thinner pods.

I did sow some broad beans back in November, in the cold greenhouse, but these were incredibly slow to germinate and more than half the seeds rotted off. The crucial difference is the temperature: the optimum soil temperature for germination for broad beans is around 12C, but they will germinate between 7C-15C.



Indoor germination tends to create sturdier, healthier seedlings CREDIT: Andrew Crowley

What many gardeners don't realise is the speedier a seed is to germinate, the better the plant you get – slower germinators will rarely catch up. This is because the seed immediately starts to imbibe water, and uses reserves in the seed until the leaves kick into action. The ones that fail to germinate rot off.

Professional grower Ben Hartman (author of *The Lean Farm*) makes a germination chamber, or heated cabinet, from an old fridge, using an electric element and a thermostat, and stacks his seed trays inside. When they start to germinate he takes them out into a lighter, cooler place and spreads them out. Seeds usually only need a higher temperature for germination. Once they've started to grow, they need light more than warmth.

My cucumbers germinate by the Aga in two days. Their optimum is 18C-35C. Then they go to the kitchen windowsill, until ready for the unheated greenhouse. Visit allotment-garden.org and search Best Temperatures for Seed Germination if you'd like to know more.

Horatio's Garden announces its new head gardener

I've just heard that the Horatio's Garden at Oswestry in the Midland Centre for Spinal Injuries (designed by me) has a new head gardener, Alex Law. Alex comes from one of my favourite gardens, Wollerton Old Hall in Shropshire.



Horatio's Garden provides an outdoor sanctuary for spinal injury patients CREDIT: Ruseell Sach

I was interested as to why Alex had switched to the charity, as Horatio's Garden is on a relatively small scale in terms of square metres of plants. The reason, Alex said, was that he went into horticulture as it has a strong purpose. A mix of science, art and people hopefully changing the world for the better. He is also impressed by the ethos the charity has, and how everyone is at the top of their game, especially Olivia Chapple, the founder (horatiosgarden.org.uk). I could not agree more.

Bunny's plant of the month: *Erodium pelargoniflorum*



The flowers are charming, reminiscent of a small pelargonium flower; the upper two white petals are spotted with a deep purply pink, whereas the lower three have a tracery of delicate pink veins CREDIT: Andrew Crowley

I have only grown this plant for nine months or so, but it has greatly endeared itself to me. Its name is a nod to the fact that it looks like a pelargonium, with soft, apple green, heart-shaped leaves that have slightly felted undersides.

For me, so far it has been totally evergreen, keeping its bright-leaved look even after several sharp frosts on the trot.

I am also surprised that, since I acquired it, it has not yet been out of flower. It is not awash with flowers but definitely has enough that I can't help but admire them. The flowers are charming, reminiscent of a small pelargonium flower; the upper two white petals are spotted with a deep purply pink, whereas the lower three have a tracery of delicate pink veins.

Erodium pelargoniflorum is not widely available; I have no idea why not but try bethchatto.co.uk. It roots from cuttings in a couple of weeks (in my Hydropod), and the babies are now chugging along in the cold greenhouse, cheekily shoving up the odd flower. In the garden it grows in dry shade under my buxom, multi-stemmed, cloud-pruned box, spreading and flourishing in the poorest soil imaginable. Seed is available from plant-world-seeds.com.