

## Diary

### 17 January

Brassica Conference and Exhibition,  
Lincolnshire Showground  
bridget.pannell@pvga.co.uk

### 18-19 January

Organic Producer Conference,  
Aston University, Birmingham  
www.organicresearchcentre.com  
*Includes sessions on horticulture*

LAMMA 2012, Newark and Nottinghamshire  
Showground, Newark  
www.lammashow.co.uk  
*Farm machinery equipment and services*

### 24-27 January

IPM Essen, Essen, Germany  
www.ipm-messe.de  
*International flowers and plants  
trade show*

### 8 February

ADAS/Syngenta UK Vegetable Industry  
Conference & Exhibition, East of England  
Showground, Peterborough  
ukveg.adas.co.uk  
*The theme is 'Profit from sustainability'*

### 21-22 February

NFU Conference 2012, International  
Convention Centre, Birmingham  
www.nfuonline.com  
*Workshops and debates on 'Meeting the  
challenge'*

### 23 February

Grower of the Year Awards 2012,  
Lancaster London  
www.groweroftheyear.co.uk  
*Awards celebrating the best in  
production horticulture*

### 2 March

Soil Association Annual Conference,  
Royal Horticultural Halls, London  
www.soilassociation.org  
*'Facing the future: innovation in food and  
farming' is the title*

### 16 May

HDC/Cut Flower Centre Conference,  
Spalding, Lincolnshire  
www.hdc.org.uk  
*Presentations on developing the market  
for cut flowers*

### 22-26 May

RHS Chelsea Flower Show, London  
www.rhs.org.uk/Shows-Events

### 27-30 May

World Potato Congress 2012, Edinburgh,  
Scotland  
www.wpc2012.net  
*Takes as its title 'Think global, win local'*

### 26-27 June

HTA National Plant Show,  
Stoneleigh Park, Coventry  
www.thenationalplantshow.co.uk  
*Trade show for British plant suppliers*

### 1-5 July

Horticulture in Europe, Angers, France  
colloque.inra.fr/she2012  
*Conference on horticultural research and  
technology*

# Protecting bogs – and growers

**Does competitiveness still justify  
using peat in British horticulture?**

by Alan Knight

Remember the 'peat-free by '93' rallying call of the environmental groups? They hoped that through consumer pressure and what retailers chose to offer, the garden market would move from being peat dependent to peat-free in just a couple of years. All sorts of peat alternatives appeared but, one by one, failed to clear the quality hurdle and the lost confidence stifled progress for the next 20 years.

Today, the peat controversy not only lingers but snowballs and, for many, the case against peat has been reinforced by awareness of carbon footprints and ecological services. While not everyone is convinced, the government wants closure and has announced voluntary targets of peat-free gardening by 2020 and professional horticulture by 2030. The task force I chair was established to help those with a stake in the debate to map out how to achieve those targets.

We are using more peat in 2011 than we did in 1993 but we are also selling more peat-free, not, in the main, by using 100 per cent peat-free products but through a slow and gradual dilution of peat. This tells us that customers are not loyal to peat; they are loyal to its performance and price. This is echoed in the professional sector, although its use of peat has decreased significantly.

One important job of the task force is to agree on the problem being solved by going peat-free. In 1990 it was about the protection of English raised bogs. Since then key bogs like Thorne Moors have become protected, not through market pressure but through deal making between the bog owner and government. My challenge to those pushing this debate is to test my assumption that the best way to protect English bogs is through the planning regime and policies such as the Habitats Directive, not by market interventions.

Domestic planning policy alone, however, will not change our reliance on peat. Two thirds of the peat used in the UK is already imported. If protecting more of our bogs simply results in buying more peat from abroad, that raises important

ethical and commercial questions.

As scientists and politicians learn more about carbon sinks and natural eco-services, the case to protect and restore peat bogs around the world will strengthen. The case to leave all bogs alone, whatever habitat they currently support, relies on their role as sources or sinks of carbon and hence their role in climate change. But just how small or big the carbon numbers are depends on methodology and assumptions. I am not motivated by the slightly ambiguous challenge made against the ethics of every gram of peat but I am motivated by the need to protect and restore English bogs.

So I also worry for a UK industry whose business model relies on imported peat. The long-term resilience of supply, price and reputation of peat sourced overseas must be fragile.

If there are elements of horticulture where peat has a magic touch that cannot be reached by alternatives then these need to use the least controversial sources of peat. For example, in terms of biodiversity, harvesting peat from farmland and creating wetland in the process is different to the destruction of raised mires. This will require a new form of conversation and collaboration and that is one of the many topics the task force will cover.

We also need to ask ourselves if we are sure that competitiveness still justifies using peat in British horticulture. I worry that the long-term continued use of peat might undermine our competitiveness more than an early move to alternatives.

The industry wants the UK market to back UK horticulture. In return should UK horticulture back UK manufactured peat alternatives? Over time, a local, sustainable source of growing media that matches the quality and price of existing peat will better help UK growers compete than a long-term reliance on imported growing media from ever more distant and controversial sources.

That is what I believe and I am looking forward to working with many of you to test this narrative and come up with plan that helps both the natural environment and the industry to prosper.



Alan Knight is an independent consultant who specialises in sustainable development issues. He chairs Defra's sustainable growing media task force, set up to identify the barriers to phasing out the use of peat in horticulture in England and to develop a comprehensive plan for future action