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## Peat supplier blames summer rains for shortage

William Sinclair Holdings issues profit warning, having only extracted a fifth of normal peat harvest because of wet weather

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The peat bogs of Egton Moor in North York National Park. Wet weather this summer has badly affected the harvesting of peat from commercial bogs. Photograph: Alamy

Britain's biggest peat supplier has warned that the awful summer could leave garden centres struggling to grow enough plants, after admitting it had been unable to harvest the nation's waterlogged bogs.

William Sinclair Holdings issued a profits warning on Tuesday, saying it had only been able to achieve about a fifth of its normal annual harvest of about 570,000 cubic metres of peat.

"With the lousy sunshine we haven't had five solid days of sunshine to allow the [harvest] cycle to take place," said Peter Williams, its finance director.

Peat, which is the key ingredient in compost, is harvested by loosening the top couple of inches of the bog, letting it dry and then turning it over before collecting it.

"The cycle takes four to five days – if it rains during that time you have to start all over again," Williams said. "Over a normal summer season you might [harvest the same bog] 10 times, this year we've had one-and-half harvests on average. It's not just us – everyone is really short of peat out there."

He warned that the shortage – which is also affecting the world's other top producers in Ireland, Scandinavia and the Baltic states – may lead to a scarcity of plants in garden centres.

"They are really going to struggle going forward as there is just not enough peat," Williams said, adding that nurseries and garden centres will be affected more than household gardeners because intensive plant growers require "a particular quality of peat and they are much less trusting of peat-free alternatives".

Williams added that when peat harvests are low, alternatives, such as recycled garden waste or ground down trees, can be used in household compost.

He hoped the peat crisis may trigger an uptake in peat-free alternatives. But creating alternatives as good as peat was difficult because "peat is like a blank piece of paper with no nutrients and you can add whatever you like", while most alternatives already have some nutrients included, Williams said.

Environmentalists have long campaigned for peat harvesting to be banned because it is very carbon-intensive. And, Williams said, supermarkets have been trying to persuade customers to move away from peat composts because of corporate social responsibility pledges.

Friends of the Earth's head of policy and campaigns Craig Bennett – who sat on the Government's peat task force said:

"The industry's future lies in the development of peat-free alternatives, but the sector has been far too slow to embrace change. Peat bogs are valuable wildlife sites which 'lock in' carbon - they shouldn't be dug up and destroyed. Gardeners and garden centres can play their part too, by insisting on peat-free products."

William Sinclair has recently developed an alternative made from household garden waste, which Williams said was "almost as good" as peat.

The new product is made from ground-down woody bits of plants. Production of the peat alternative has recently started at a factory in Doncaster and the company has won planning permission for a second factory operating 24/7 in Ellesmere Port, Cheshire.

William Sinclair warned investors that the shortage will lead to a collapse in annual profits from £3.2m last year to low hundreds of thousands this year.

The company owns about 810 hectares (2,000 acres) of peat bogs, mostly in Cumbria and south of Edinburgh.

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