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Peat industry washout puts gardeners on red alert



Peat harvests in the UK and Ireland have only been at 30 per cent of their usual levels

Andrew Clark Deputy Business Editor

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Torrential summer rain has left the horticultural industry facing a chronic shortage of peat, causing a supply squeeze that could wreak havoc for amateur and professional gardeners alike.

A leading compost supplier warned yesterday that the annual harvest of peat was likely to be less than 30 per cent of its usual level because bogs in the North of England, Scotland and the Republic of Ireland had become waterlogged.

William Sinclair owns brands such as J. Arthur Bower's and New Horizon. The Lincolnshire-based company's shares slumped by 8 per cent yesterday after it published a trading update, in which it admitted that its dividend would be cut and that the retail price of peat-based compost was likely to rise by 10 per cent to 15 per cent.

Bernard Burns, the company's chief executive — who announced his resignation yesterday, citing personal reasons — said that the peat supply was the weakest on record: "The harvest is something of the order of 25 per cent to 30 per cent of a

harvest in a normal year,” he said. “That’s the worst result we’ve posted within any record I’ve been able to access and it’s consistent with what’s been happening throughout the UK and Ireland. There’s going to be a massive shortage of peat throughout Europe this year.”

The dismal harvest is likely to be seized on by environmentalists as an opportunity for horticulturalists to reduce their reliance on peat, which is widely considered to be an unsustainable resource. A study by Natural England two years ago found that three quarters of England’s peatlands were damaged or degraded because of the effects of excess harvesting. The bogs were once described by the Prince of Wales as “Britain’s rainforests” because of their importance as a habitat to birds, insects and plants.

Peat is also a fossil fuel that, when burnt, gives off carbon dioxide. Craig Bennett, policy director at Friends of the Earth, said: “Digging it up, putting it in plastic bags and flogging them at garden centres is not really the best use of these valuable resources.”

He said that the use of waste wood and green compost could compensate for scarce peat, adding: “I wouldn’t have too much sympathy for garden centres, because they’ve been incredibly slow to move on from this incredibly unsustainable material.”

Peat regrowth is both rare, taking place in less than 50 per cent of peatlands, and slow, at about 1mm a year. Nonetheless, many professional suppliers of plants stick to peat because they find that it allows them to cultivate plants with the uniform colour and size required by big retail chains. Mr Burns said that suppliers to groups such as B&Q needed to predict the maturity date of plants with high accuracy.

“Professional growers have an unwillingness to accept anything other than peat,” he said. “If the market is as bad as it looks, the multiple retailers will have to compromise their exacting specifications and give the growers more scope to use alternatives.”

Garden centres are yet to experience a slowdown in supply because of a lag between the extraction of peat and its arrival at the end of the supply chain. However, Peter Burks, chairman of the Garden Centre Association, said: “It will manifest itself as an issue later in the year and into next year. Customers will see an issue in terms of the quantity available and in prices.”

He said that although the problem was likely to boost sales of alternatives, peat was here to stay: “There’s nothing as good as peat. It will never disappear completely.”

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