

The Horticulturist



Cut-flower farming

PLUS Peat-free compost | James Bruce Lecture | Plant health | Routes into horticulture | Green horticulture

CONTENTS

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IN THIS ISSUE

4 Peat-free compost

Catherine Dawson outlines the way one company is involved in all aspects of the search for alternatives to peat.

7 Second-guessing the future

Matthew Appleby, Editor of *Horticulture Week*, reflects on the challenges facing the horticultural industry.

10 Sap ooze or oomycete?

Derek Hargreaves on the death of a number of *Betula pendula* over the past couple of years.

12 From plot to vase: farming flowers

Liz Anderson reports on a relatively new horticultural career and charts the rise of a group of professional cut-flower farmers.

16 How 'green' are we as an industry?

Simon Jones poses questions and looks at ways to find solutions.

20 Institute news

20 Routes into horticulture

CIH President Susan Nicholas starts a new series of articles showcasing CIH members and their individual routes into horticulture.

25 Book review

26 Branch reports

30 Horticultural research

Edible crops

FROM THE PRESIDENT

We did not envisage that for the second year running we would be holding the 2021 AGM online. Due to the uncertainty of the spread of new variants of Covid-19, and the restrictions surrounding face to face meetings, this was the only option. The elected officers are settling down into their roles. Over the past couple of months trustees and branch officers have also been completing their terms of office. We would like to thank outgoing volunteers who have been an integral part of our success. We welcome new officers, and we will provide support at all levels to ensure continuity.

We were very much looking forward to the CIH Autumn Conference in Edinburgh; sadly this has once again been postponed, this time until 2022. We very much hope that we will be able to plan this event in the near future.

The YHoY Action Group, together with Regional Organisers, has forged ahead with developing the online competition. I am pleased to report that the first round (Round 1) has been successfully completed, without any technical hitches. We did not envisage holding the Regional finals online, but once again due to Covid-19 restrictions this has taken place online. We are hoping that we will be able to hold the Grand Final at RGBE Logan Garden in the autumn as a face-to-face event.

Helen Sessions (Development Officer) is now a fully integrated member of the team, engaging with partner organisations, interacting with branches and along with Dr David Elphinstone (Chair of Education) is working towards finalising CIH's Continuing Professional Development (CPD) offering.

Communications with branches has greatly improved. The quarterly meetings are proving fruitful. We have a two-way dialogue that is enabling us to have a better understanding of branch needs, and also gives us the platform for discussing future events arranged nationally and regionally. Helen is now in the process of meeting with branches to build a relationship for mutual benefit. Going forward we are actively encouraging branches, via their chair, to form an integral part of any changes necessary for our success.

The council of Trustees continue to meet via Zoom. We have started the process of updating the strategy for the next three to five years. Normally we would have held a Strategic Planning day, but like many organisations we have to re-think this. Looking ahead we are planning one or two live meetings with others held on Zoom. Face-to-face meetings give members the opportunity to network, and whilst in Zoom meetings we get the business done, I am sure we are all looking forward to catching up in person.

I am looking forward to a productive year in all elements of our work and thank you for your continuing support.

Susan Nicholas FCIHort, President
president@horticulture.org.uk



Cover Sweet peas at Gordon Castle Walled Garden, Moray, Scotland, owned and farmed by Zara Gordon Lennox.

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Write for *The Horticulturist*

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If you are interested in writing an article for the journal or have a newsworthy item please contact the Editor, Barbara Segall, at barbara@bsegall.plus.com.

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GROWING MEDIA Catherine Dawson outlines the way one company is involved in all aspects of the search for alternatives to peat.

Peat-free compost: a manufacturer's perspective

Having worked for nearly four decades in the field of growing media, my career has coincided with what must be one of most tumultuous periods in the history of horticultural substrates in the UK. But how much less interesting it might have been without the strongly political and controversial effects of the debate surrounding the use of peat. Whatever one's view of the environmental impacts of using peat, it is inescapable that it is an extremely effective growing medium and a challenge to emulate. As a manufacturer of alternatives to peat, Melcourt has been involved in all aspects of the debate from the start and an active member of the Sustainable Growing Media Task Force.

Melcourt: from mulch to growing media

Melcourt was founded in the early 1980s at a time when the benefits of bark mulch as a labour-saving device in landscape management were being recognised. During the same era the rise in popularity of containerised plants brought with it growing evidence that the peat/grit mixes which had been the norm, were not always entirely appropriate, particularly for longer-term nursery stock. Gradual structural breakdown in the lower layers of the pot caused waterlogging and root

death that inevitably impacted on the quality of the top growth.

Peat/ bark mixes began to take over when their benefits in terms of better long-term structural stability were demonstrated. So growers, particularly in the hardy ornamental nursery stock sector, became used to handling bark as an ingredient. This was to have significant benefits when it came to using mixes that contained no peat at all. Unlike some of the other peat alternatives that growers were being asked to use, bark was a familiar material and therefore less challenging.

When the move towards alternatives started to gain pace in the 1990s Melcourt was well-placed to service the growing demand for finer bark products, which were more peat-like in nature. By the early 2000s it had moved to the provision of complete growing media in line with the general trend for nurseries to move away from mixing their own composts. Sylvamix®, its range of professional peat-free growing media which is used by some of the UK's most prestigious growers, was launched in 2001 and in 2014 SylvaGrow®, its retail equivalent was introduced.

Much has been written about the reasons why growers and gardeners are being asked to stop using peat. Coming to general awareness in the

late 1980s, the debate at that time centered on the loss of habitat and biodiversity caused by peat harvesting. The lowland raised mires favoured by peat producers are, in their natural state, host to a unique flora and fauna that is simply not found in any other habitat.

Government initiatives against peat use

The first UK government target for peat reduction was introduced in 1995 and aimed for the UK to be 40% peat free by 2005. In more recent years the importance of undisturbed peatland as a carbon sink and also its value in flood mitigation has widened the calls for peat harvesting to cease. Various climate change-related government legislation and policies have impacted peat production and in 2018 the UK government's *25 Year Plan to Improve the Environment* reiterated previously stated targets for peat use to be ended in amateur products by 2020 and in all UK horticulture by 2030.

Governments elsewhere are also now bringing in restrictions. Germany for example aspires to be peat free for retail products by 2026. The part Irish Government-owned Bord na Mona peat company, one of the principal suppliers of peat to the UK, announced in January 2021 that with immediate effect, it would no longer be harvesting