

# Peat Shortage crisis threatens the very existence of Irish Nursery / Horticultural Industry

## Thousands of Jobs at Risk

13 February 2020

The Irish horticultural community was thrown into crisis after Bord na Mona confirmed on Friday, 11 December (following a high-level meeting between the president of the IFA, Tim Cullinan and the CEO of Bord Na Mona, Tom Donnellan) that there will be no peat available to the nursery industry from March 2021.

### **Current situation**

The Irish horticultural industry uses only 1% of the total peat harvested by Bord na Mona annually. Professional horticulture uses just .5% of this 100,000 cubic metres (excluding mushrooms).

Kildare growers use approximately 20,000 cubic metres and the remainder of the Irish nursery stock industry throughout the country uses 70,000 cubic metres. The remainder goes to the domestic market.

The growth of the nursery stock industry has been directly related to the supply of excellent quality Irish peat. It has the best physical properties in terms of

1. Air and water holding capacity.
2. It also has excellent chemical properties i.e., low pH and low nutrient status. This makes it ideal for lime and fertilizers being added at the appropriate rate depending on crop.

### **Peat alternatives**

The major alternatives to peat are: coir, bark, wood fibre and green compost. However, there is no one alternative that has the properties of peat.

A viable alternative product would likely consist an appropriate mix of these other products. In addition, the availability of these products in Ireland is limited.

- **Coir**

It comes from Sri Lanka and India and is not suitable for some crops.

- **Pine Bark**

There is very little available in Ireland.

- **Wood fibre**

While it is sustainable it competes with other industries using wood and is increasing in cost

- **Green compost**

This would need to be of the highest quality for professional horticulture and there are also major risks associated with it. For example, the existence of impurities.

The bottom line is that Teagasc, in its [response](#) (20 January 2020) to the [Review of the use of Peat in the Horticultural Industry: Key Issues Consultation Paper](#), stated starkly with reference to replacing peat in ornamental production:

*There are currently no other abundant materials that have suitable properties at an affordable cost. Selecting any other material currently requires a grower to compromise in terms of crop risk where aspects of crop husbandry, yield and quality are potentially impacted and currently under-researched.*

### **Nursery Stock Industry a Green industry**

The nursery stock industry is regarded as a green industry and it appears that a locally based long standing and successful industry has been an unintended casualty of the environmental challenges that this country is facing.

This is an industry that grows plants that sequester carbon and provide spring food for songbirds. Furthermore, flowering plants sustain pollinating honeybees.

Nursery stock growers produce millions of plants annually that make a very positive contribution to our environment sequestering carbon and promoting biodiversity. The potted compost is eventually returned to the soil where it continues to store its carbon in the soil biosphere. Importing peat from the Baltic, the Balkans or elsewhere to Ireland is environmentally unsound. It will considerably increase the carbon footprint and will have a compounding detrimental effect on our efforts to meet our Paris Agreement targets.

### **Cost implications**

Professional compost including the extra ingredients added by Bord na Mona were costing €37-40 per cubic metre. Imported compost is being quoted at double this cost for nursery operatives near to Dublin port. It is envisaged that the cost to nurseries located in the western and southern parts of Ireland will be substantially higher due to transport costs. Small family businesses will have further complications as their compost requirement will be smaller and too costly to deliver. It is inevitable that many of these nurseries will cease to operate unless something is done urgently to address their problems.

Kildare growers estimate that the extra cost to them of importing peat will be in the region of €300, 000 per annum. It is estimated that it will cost the industry nationally an additional €1.25million.

The nursery stock industry will also incur an extra cost of €1.0 million annually for handling the imported compost as each nursery will have to purchase a compost handler and a bale breaker. Quotations per nursery received for this equipment are in the region of €79,000. This is an additional cost with no added income to offset it. The implications for each nursery will result in the cost of the compost being effectively doubled. This will have serious consequences for the long-term viability and competitiveness of the Irish nursery stock industry.

### **Protecting jobs**

There are currently 6,500 jobs in the horticultural industry, plus 11,000 indirectly associated with the industry and most of these employees are in rural parts of Ireland. While it is hugely important that the Just Transition Fund ([JTF](#)) is available to support training and the creation of new jobs it is vital that these 17,500 jobs are protected and nurtured.

**Biosecurity**

The Department of Agriculture has been very successful in keeping the nursery industry relatively free from pests and diseases. Major biosecurity issues could arise when importing large quantities of plants from Europe and elsewhere with the potential to decimate our natural environment.

**Conclusion**

Professional horticulture represents a very important part of the Irish nursery industry supplying food and amenity products. The amount of peat used in the industry is exceptionally low but critical to the high-quality horticultural crops produced. The substitution of Irish peat by importing peat from other countries does not address the climate issue but rather compounds it.

The industry now urgently requires:

- a. A programme to research alternatives to peat in the professional horticultural industry to allow Irish growers to transition if peat is no longer be available.
- b. Primary legislation to licence bogs, up to a certain size, to harvest peat for professional horticulture until research finds a suitable alternative compost mix.

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