

Garden for Life is helping everyone grow closer to nature by exploring, enjoying and caring for biodiversity in gardens throughout Scotland.

Supporters of the project include British Trust for Ornithology; BTCV; Beechgrove Garden (Tern TV); Butterfly Conservation Scotland; Buglife; Biodiversity Implementation Team (SNH); Federation of City Farms and Community Gardens; Grounds For Learning; Grow Forth; Keep Scotland Beautiful; Plantlife Scotland; Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh; RSPB Scotland; Rural Projects; Scottish Allotments and Gardens Society; Scottish Community Diet Project; Scottish Government Biodiversity Team; Scottish Natural Heritage; Scottish Wildlife Trust; The National Trust for Scotland; Trellis.

Author: Sue Walker

All photographs by Lorne Gill/SNH except:
Large Heath, Duncan Davidson/Butterfly Conservation Scotland
Argent and sable moth, Dave Green/Butterfly Conservation
Golden-ringed dragonfly, Laurie Campbell/SNH
Short-eared owl, Keith Ringland
Threave Gardens, the National Trust for Scotland, David Robertson
Large heath butterfly, David Whitaker
Hen harrier, Mark Hamblin

Front cover images clockwise from left: red damselfly; argent and sable moth; sundew

© Scottish Natural Heritage 2008
NP15K0208
ISBN 978 1 85397 540 0

garden without peat

our wildlife needs it
more than we do....





Left to right: cottongrass; golden-ringed dragonfly; sphagnum moss; short-eared owl

Our wildlife needs peat more than we do...

There are many rare and special plants and animals that live on lowland raised bogs - where garden peat comes from. They need the peat to survive. There were once nearly 95,000 hectares of lowland raised bogs in the UK. Now **94%** have been damaged or destroyed - and only some 6,000ha remain largely undamaged.



Commercial peat extraction

Because most lowland raised bogs in the UK are now given some level of protection, we are now importing much of what we use – 65% in all. Much of this comes from the Republic of Ireland, damaging their precious habitats in the process. Once these bogs have been destroyed it takes thousands of years for the peat to build up again.

Five things you should know about peat...

- Peat is not a good soil improver or mulch
- Gardeners only started using peat widely in the 1950s
- Removing the peat from the bogs releases CO₂ into the atmosphere, adding to climate change
- Gardeners don't need peat to produce beautiful, productive gardens - the National Trust's gardens, for example, are now virtually peat-free
- There are now really good alternatives which the Royal Horticultural Society says 'support healthy growth and good flower and fruit production' for all kinds of plants

Large heath butterfly



Flanders Moss

Lowland raised bogs are still being destroyed and damaged to extract peat. Gardeners buy 2.1million cubic metres of it each year - 66% of what's extracted. That's the equivalent of 24,000 double decker buses full of peat!



Threave Garden, Castle Douglas



garden without peat

our wildlife needs it more than we do...



Cranberries

Scotland's lowland raised bogs are as important to Europe as tropical rainforests are to the world.

Most people know that tropical rainforests are home to many plants and animals that can't survive elsewhere, and that destroying them is bad for wildlife - and the planet.

Not as many people know that lowland raised bogs are also home to many rare and precious plants and animals. And just like the rainforest, the peat in these bogs, and the plants it supports, lock up carbon dioxide - helping to slow climate change.

Scotland has a significant proportion of Europe's undamaged lowland raised bogs - so destroying this fragile habitat is also very bad for wildlife and the planet.

The bad news

Despite the fact that gardeners only started to use peat widely about 60 years ago, they now buy more peat than any other group - including professional horticulturalists and

local authorities. The convenience and low price of peat have made it a hard habit for us to kick. Some tried peat substitutes when they were first introduced, but found them much more difficult to use and have never tried again. As a result we use over two million cubic metres of the stuff every year, and lowland peat bogs are still being destroyed, along with all the plants and animals that depend on them.



Commercial peat extraction

The good news

Gardeners use peat for mulches, soil conditioners and growing media. In truth peat has never been ideal for mulches or soil improvement, and there are now much better alternatives for both uses. Peat is a good growing medium, and that's why most gardeners find it difficult to give up. But now extensive trials by the likes of the Royal Horticultural Society, the National Trust, and Gardening Which, have found that alternative growing media can be as good, or even better, than peat.

The second piece of good news is that compost - one of the best mulches, soil improvers and (mixed with other things) growing media - is free! Even better, local authorities, keen to reduce landfill, want to encourage more people to make their own compost, and many are helping people get started with subsidised compost bins, free advice and composting workshops.

Why bogs are so special

Sphagnum moss is the building block of peat. When the moss dies it can't decompose properly because the ground is very waterlogged. New moss grows on top, compressing it into peat. The peat grows at about 1mm a year. Some raised bogs are seven metres deep - which makes them at least 7,000 years old. This is why it will take thousands of years for the peat we have destroyed to come back again.

Without bogs we may lose astonishing plants like cranberries, sundews, sphagnum mosses and cotton grass; beautiful insects like large heath butterflies and spectacular birds like hen harriers and short eared owls.

Top to bottom: hen harrier; bog mosses; large heath and sundew



What's the alternative?

Growing media

This is used to start off seeds in pots or for growing on larger plants: home made potting compost; commercial peat-free multipurpose composts; topsoil; recycled green waste.

Soil improvers

These add organic matter to the soil to increase nutrients and aid water retention: compost; farmyard manure; leaf mould; proprietary peat-free soil improvers.



Gardening without peat

Mulches

A layer of material spread over the soil to keep down weeds, conserve moisture and insulate the soil. Compost; chipped bark; cocoa shells; leafmould; composted bracken.

Peat fires fading

Many people in Scotland still think of peat as a fuel, and until the middle of the last century this was its main use in Scotland, with at least 70,000 tonnes cut each year by crofters to warm their homes. The advent of gas, electricity and more recently oil for heating, and the time-consuming nature of the work, have meant that this use has steeply declined - now less than 20,000 tons a year is cut, most of it from blanket bogs (see below) in the Highlands and Islands, rather than the lowland raised bogs that are threatened by extraction for horticultural use.



Peat for fuel, North Uist

Find out more

There are a number of organisations that can help you find the right peat-free alternative. Check out their websites or phone them for leaflets and advice.

Garden for Life
www.gardenforlife.org.uk
tel: 0131 623 7058

Royal Horticultural Society
www.rhs.org.uk
tel: 0845 260 5000

Scottish Wildlife Trust
SWT produces a downloadable leaflet - 'For Peat's Sake', with information about suppliers
www.swt.org.uk
tel: 0131 312 7765

The National Trust
www.nationaltrust.org.uk
tel: 0870 458 4000

Waste and Resources Action Programme (WRAP)
www.wrap.org.uk
tel: 0808 100 2040

Scottish Allotments and Gardens Society
www.sags.org.uk