

It is easy being green

Jane Perrone talks about how to use ethical garden products to attract a more socially aware, and potentially more well-off, consumer

In my day job as gardening editor at the Guardian – where we try to champion organic gardening and peat-free compost – I am often in danger of complacency about how far horticulture has come in terms of adopting a sustainable approach to growing.

Sadly, a visit to a garden centre is almost guaranteed to shake off my smugness. Browsing the stacks of growbags for instance, there's usually only a 50/50 chance I'll find a peat-free option on offer. This is worrying, given the government and the horticultural industry's joint goal that all compost should be peat free by 2020.

It's not just peat-free that's an issue however. Garden centre staff are often ill-informed about the alternatives to neonicotinoid-laden pesticides, as well as the science that's highlighting the dangers of glyphosate weedkillers on human health.

In the same way, furniture is not always made from FSC-approved wood, and gas patio heaters are still available for sale or hire in some garden centres. I often leave feeling depressed that gardeners, often trumpeted as guardians of nature, are being offered so little accurate information about the damage some of their products could be doing to the very creatures they are supposed to love.

Huge opportunity

The modern emphasis on sustainable products offers not only ethical benefits, but also financial ones. Independents in particular have a great opportunity to distinguish



themselves from the big chains by offering an alternative.

For instance, take Bud Garden Centre in Manchester, which is ploughing a very different furrow by sourcing peat-free, organic plants wherever it can and selling only peat-free growing media and UK-grown plants.

Customers are increasingly aware of the peat-free options, especially now their quality is comparable with peat-based products. Since Bud opened four years ago, owner Brenda Smith says she's seen an increase in customers coming to her specifically looking for peat-free.

She comments: "We're tiny, but people are coming from 20 miles away to buy Melcourt peat-free compost. I've seen a big change in that this year: they read about the recent trials in Gardening Which?

magazine where the Melcourt compost did really well."

Give it a go

There is an argument that it's not worth bothering to cater for customers who follow organic gardening principles, because the alternatives to weedkillers and pesticides tend to be things you can't buy in a garden centre. For instance, it costs nothing to let the dandelions grow as food for the bees, or to make your own plant feed from comfrey.

However, this ignores that the majority of environmentally aware customers tend to be the better educated, higher earning gardeners. In other words, this means they have money in their pockets to spend on the latest composting equipment, top-of-the-range bags of peat-free and so on. ▶

Here is a selection of products that major on sustainability.

Twool

Rather than twine made from imported jute, Twool is a sustainable product made from rare breed Whiteface Dartmoor sheep. twool.co.uk

Elho pots

Dutch plastic pot manufacturer Elho lists sustainability as one of the five elements of its success. Forty per cent of its pots are made from recycled plastic and it is set to increase that to 50%. Its packaging is 60% recycled and 100% recyclable. elho.com

Bulldog tools

This company declares itself the only UK manufacturer of garden tools, made in its forge in Wigan since 1780. www.bulldogtools.co.uk

Delfland

A Soil Association-certified organic nursery family business, based in Cambridgeshire. It supplies both retail and trade with vegetable seedlings. delfland.co.uk

Slug Gone wool pellets

An eco-alternative to slug pellets, this product from Vitax is made from waste wool from British sheep. It keeps slugs off vulnerable plants like hostas and contains slow release nutrients to feed the soil without posing a threat to wildlife, children or pets. www.vitax.co.uk

Jane Perrone is The Guardian's gardening editor and the author of *The Allotment Keeper's Handbook*

Twitter: @janeperrone
www.perrone.blogs.com