

plant remnants. Substitutes for wild-collected peat such as waterlogged straw can be mixed with sandy soils to create an underlying water reservoir from 10–15 centimetres (4–6 inches) below the peat substrate. However, these take too long to break down to make adequate soil for the upper layer. Some forms of soft brown coal (lignite) are effectively fossilised peat, and can be milled to make a good replacement, but these vary considerably in quality so test them on a small scale first.

Peat mining is a well-publicised environmental issue, although it can be harvested sustainably. Irish peat bogs have been harvested for fuel on a massive scale for perhaps millennia, yet in parts of that small country the peat continues to accumulate as fast as it is removed. In Canada, another very cold and poorly drained country but with far more massive reserves of peat, the harvest only skims the surface of what is available. In the Southern Hemisphere,

New Zealand peat is only exploited in a limited way. So why the drama?

There is actually a good reason to worry about peat habitats in the United Kingdom, because this is a relatively small, cold, and heavily populated country. Peat bogs here are a significant habitat for many plants which are found nowhere else, so harvesting peat is a problem because it displaces or destroys many of these plant species.

In the United Kingdom most peat is used for the 'traditional' John Innes potting mixes rather than specialised peat-bog plants. These are perhaps the most water-repellent soil mixes in the world if you allow them to dry out even once — and I have tested quite a few. Their hydrophobic properties are largely due to the use of peat in the mix. Many nurseries worldwide now avoid using peat in any mixes (except for peat-requiring plants), not only for environmental reasons, but also because of the

S. x 'Alien Banana'
(*S. psittacina* x *S. alata*)
— the rich colour and
prolific pitcher
production make this a
potential commercial
variety despite its
unusual shape.

