

Letters



Postcards from Slovenia, land of wild flowers

My Mother used to tell me how wonderful the meadows were when she was young, in the early part of the 20th century: the local water meadows were full of flowers including bee orchids. There were still flowers to be seen when I was a child in the forties, but not such a variety. Now there are no flowers at all in many fields. Gardeners are planting wildflower mixes, but on a small scale it's difficult to create the same atmosphere as the real thing.

You can still go back in time in Slovenia, where the unspoiled fields are full of flowers, bees buzzing, crickets singing and butterflies flitting over all. There it seems time has stopped.

We visited in June and saw dry, damp and sub-alpine meadows with all the associated insects.

Slovenia still has virgin forest, and lynx, jackals, wolves and foxes all live successfully in the wild. It's thought there are around 60 brown bears in Slovenian forests, more than in any other European country. They keep out of the way of humans, as do the other wild animals, so we were very lucky to see them.

A population of only two million, of whom almost half are in urban areas, means that when you're out in the countryside you feel you have it all to yourself!

Helen Cullens, St. Albans

Our excellent guide's website <https://www.natureincolour.eu/>
More photographs at www.fands.org.uk/1.FANDSslovenia-TITLE.htm



Peat resources

Following Rosemary FitzGerald's well-researched article concerning the use of peat – as a professional gardener I have to purchase plants from a very limited number of local wholesale growers, so I'm restricted to buying the growing media of their choice.

I asked one nurseryman why they continued to use peat; the reasons he gave may be illuminating. First, peat is a reliable, consistent product that *guarantees repeatability*, essential for the mass production of quality plants, year after year. In order to be competitive, there has to be a level playing field. If one nursery tries an alternative product which is ultimately less effective, it has the potential to put their business in jeopardy.

Secondly, because peat contains no nutrients it is easy to manipulate to suit the crop in production. Similarly, the crop's water requirements are predictable, vital when using timed irrigation systems.

This response leads me to surmise that peat will continue to be used in significant quantities until a viable, well-researched, cost-effective alternative becomes widely available.

I suggest that peat is similar to fossil-fuel-powered cars. We know there are alternatives, such as electric vehicles, which would probably be better for the environment – but would they be better for *me*? We tend not to choose something perceived as worse, or perhaps only equal to, what we already have. Rather our tendency is to purchase a better, newer product, or a cheaper one that does the same job. So to persuade the industry to switch, an alternative product must be at least equal to and preferably better than one containing peat, and it must be of consistent quality year after year.

The alternatives which are available tend to be variable, or not necessarily quite the same quality. But we could partially solve the problem by using alternatives wherever peat-quality products are definitely not necessary, thereby limiting peat use. This includes filling planting holes to assist new plants to acclimatise, mulching/soil improving existing plantings, and filling permanent containers.

For all these uses, I have begun to use *County Compost*, produced in the Midlands and sold by the council from local recycling centres under the *Care* brand. Initially I had reservations, as who knows what pathogens find their way into 'the green bin'. But I have been pleasantly surprised. It's a high-quality, friable and well-structured product, excellent for planting and mulching. I think it will need to be mixed with a John Innes product for containers, but it has definitely reduced my use of peat by about 85%. I also limit carbon emissions with a single trip to collect compost while dropping off green waste, which will be turned into more compost.

Finally, be wary of products which claim to be 'peat-free'. In the horticulture industry we have heard of nurseries using imported plug plants, grown in peat, potting them on into peat-free composts and selling them as peat-free. It's very difficult to know exactly what you are buying, even with the best intentions.

Kelly Baldry, Leicestershire

Spreading the word

I have a suggestion which I think would be helpful at publicising the Hardy Plant Society and increasing membership.

What do members do with their old HPS Journals? Not everyone files them for future reference. Instead of chucking them out, if that's what would otherwise happen, why not take one or two next time you visit your GP or dentist, and leave them in the waiting room for other patients to glance through. In my local surgery there's usually at least one old RHS Journal amongst other magazines. And it is, of course, not nearly as interesting!

A M Scott, Colchester