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Executive Secretary/Treasurer, Ann Reilly
210 Cartwright Blvd., Massapequa Park, NY 11762

Mother Nature Fools Peat Moss Producers

by Ann Reilly

If your peat moss supplier comes a knocking and advises you to stock up for next year *now*, listen to him. Sphagnum peat moss will be in short supply next season, and you don't have to be an economist to know that means higher prices. What's the reason for the shortage? Blame it on Mother Nature!

There's plenty of peat lying in bogs across Canada, in Quebec, New Brunswick, Ontario, Manitoba and British Columbia, but much of the eastern peat could not be harvested this year, causing the shortages. There was simply too much rainfall. Even though western Canada had a banner production year, with harvesting from April to October instead of the usual June to October, the difference won't be made up.

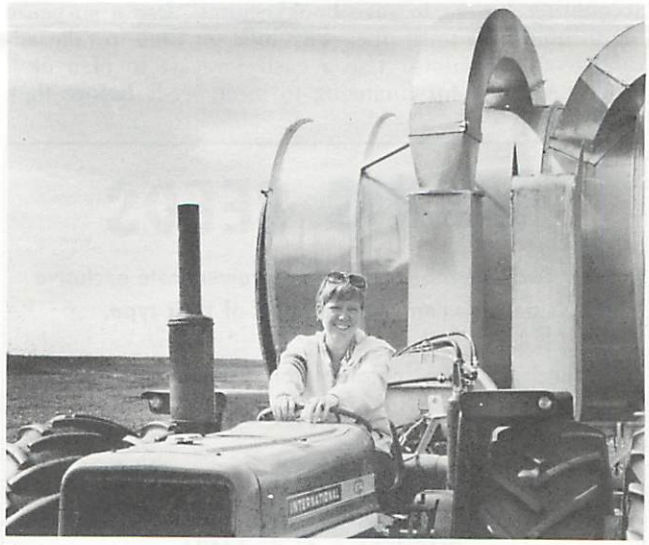
About a dozen years ago, new and modern methods were developed for harvesting sphagnum peat moss. But, unlike older and slower manual methods where peat moss was cut into blocks, taken from the bogs and stacked to dry, sphagnum peat moss today is harvested dry. If it rains, the bog must dry out for a day or two, after which it is harrowed to a depth of 2 inches. The next day, the peat moss is vacuumed off the bog by extra-terrestial-looking machines that are 10 ft. long and 8 ft. in diameter and hold 14 cu. yd. of peat. If the bog is wet, the sphagnum peat moss cannot be vacuumed off, plus running heavy equipment on wet peat deteriorates the peat and makes it fine and dusty.

Any good grower worth his seeds or cuttings knows of the advantages of using sphagnum peat moss — its essential sterility, its contribution to aeration, its lightness, its water holding capacity (12-to-20 times its weight), its conditioning properties, its freedom from harmful salts, chemicals or insects, its organic nature (95%). What I didn't realize until I jumped off the back of a pickup onto a spongy peat bog 60 miles east of Winnipeg is that sphagnum peat moss is the partially decomposed fibrous root system of the sphagnum moss plant, that familiar product used in sheets to line hanging baskets and as a liner in the shipment of nursery stock.

Thanks to the Canadian Sphagnum Peat Moss Information Bureau, who invited me to take the trip to one of Canada's largest producers of sphagnum peat moss, I now know that what I am dealing with when I open a bale is somewhere between 9,000 and 15,000 years old. Formed at the rate of one foot every 300 years, sphagnum peat moss bogs are usually 12 to 50 feet deep and cover 1000 to 3000 acres. The vacuum harvesting removes about 2" per year, so it's easy to see that a bog can be utilized for many decades.

Canada is our principal supplier of sphagnum peat moss, exporting an average of 400,000 tons per year. Our northern neighbor is not the largest producer of sphagnum peat moss in the world (Russia is, but they use all of theirs for fuel), but it's way up there because of its geographic location. Sphagnum peat moss bogs are located roughly between the 46th and 55th parallels. Warm summers promote growth of the green moss, and severe winters prevent the roots from completely decomposing. Russians, Irish and Scots have been burning peat to heat their homes for centuries, but only in the last 100 years have we realized the horticultural value of sphagnum peat moss.

So, when your sphagnum peat moss supplier stops by, invite him in with open arms. He has a product invaluable to you and your greenhouse success. The next time you open a bale of sphagnum peat moss, don't take its contents for granted. It may be older than recorded history, but it's at its best in its old age. And its price will be lower now than in months to come.



Executive Secretary Ann Reilly atop a peat harvester at a Winnipeg, Canada bog.