PEAT, COIR BLOCKS & COCONUT FIBRE

By George Pikington

PEAT

In the UK and Ireland, peat bogs have taken many thousands of years to lay down the layers of peat. As very few trees grow in such inhospitable environments, the layers of material being laid down consist of the lower plant species that can survive in such harsh environments, hence the longevity of layers of peat being formed. When the peat is harvested for horticultural use, the top ' x' metres/feet of peat are totally extracted. This leaves a completely dead and sterile peat layer. Thus all the living plant material, all the living organisms, life forms etc. that depended on that particular ecosystem are completely wiped out. As there is then no residual living peat/bog plants which could be used as a source of potential propagules to start the next layer of the peat formation layer. Many of the bog plants are slow colonisers of new areas. The dramatic change in plant community structure, and the local ecosystem can be devastating. Lack of stabilisation of the resident vegetation of long periods, change in humidity, fluctuations in temperature near the surface, increased wind speeds due to the lack of vegetation that once provided cover and acted as a nursery crop for young seedlings/plants that would have been growing prior to harvesting, make the conditions extremely difficult for such areas to recover. I find it hard to believe that the peat is accumulating to such a degree, which allows us to keep on harvesting this material in a sustainable way. Perhaps, like coir, peat should remain where nature placed it and not taken for horticultural/worm use, when there are many more sustainably harvested materials readily available?

COIR & COCONUT FIBRE

My point about coir usage is really an ethical one. Why import it from many 1000's miles away, causing environmental pollution in transport miles, and depriving the indigenous peoples of the coir producing country of a product that they can and do use themselves, just so that we richer westerners can use it for our worms/horticultural uses? There are alternative and sustainable products that can do the same job.

I find it emotionally rewarding in knowing that I am recycling waste that would otherwise be landfilled. I am also pleased with the knowledge that nobody is being deprived by my actions.

The opinion I hold re coir comes from listening to the first hand experiences of a buyer who travels the world for a multi million £ garden centre operation here in the UK. He stated that because of the demand we were creating for coir, it was pushing the price higher. The native peoples could not afford to buy it and it is a product that many local people make a living from.

Dr. Radha Kale of India expressed another view at the Vermillenium Conference in Kalamazoo, Michigan, Sept 2000; she was asked if the purchase of coir from tropical areas was helping the people of those areas, or robbing them. She stated quite simply when asked this question, " It is robbing them." She also went on to explain that tropical areas have, typically, a shortage of soil organic matter as it degrades rapidly in the moist and hot conditions of the tropics. Coir is such an organic matter (from coconut production) and should be returned to tropical soils, from which it came. Misguided people in wealthier parts of the world are outbidding the locals and taking it away from them. This is what is happening, according to most knowledgeable sources. Now many were up in arms because the British were campaigning against the destruction of peat bogs in the UK and Eire. Unknowingly, we were participating in the destruction of a natural soil conditioner in it's country of origin, depriving local peoples of a source of income, just so we could bed our worms in it or grow our bedding plants to pretty up our gardens, simply to impress the neighbours!

Environmentally, the transport of coir/peat in air/sea /road pollution miles is not sustainable, as all such methods pollute the environment, causing gases that are contributing to global warming.

The coir should be left in its country of origin to replenish and nourish the tropical soil from whence it came. Customers themselves can provide bedding for their worms or supplier's could provide renewable bedding or transport the worms in such a product and, as some reputable companies do. Doesn't this seem a far more environmentally sounder solution?

Before coir can be shipped halfway around the world, crossing international borders, it has to be made completely devoid of any living organisms so as not to harbour diseases that may be responsible for the infection of plants. It cannot harbour pests etc. that could be transported from the country of origin only to be introduced into the country of destination. I do not know for certain, but I doubt whether the methods used to kill off such organisms are environmentally friendly.

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