

Peat in New Brunswick



Next time you sprinkle a bag of peat over your lawn, take a moment to sniff that rich damp smell, and think of this: your handful of peat is the result of a natural composting and recycling process. Peat forms in wet and poorly aerated places where dead plant material accumulates faster than it can decompose. Because peatlands take so long to form, peat is considered to be a non-renewable resource. However, peatlands that have been developed for peat production can be restored to ecologically balanced systems within 5 to 20 years after peat extraction activities cease.



Peat is an organic substance and an ideal horticultural material that provides moisture and oxygen to growing plants. Its unique porous structure enables it to absorb up to twenty times its weight in water and its fibrous texture helps to aerate clayey soils. Although peat moss does not contain nutrients, it does adsorb nutrients added to it or present in the soil, releasing them over time as plants require. This saves valuable nutrients which are otherwise lost through leaching. Peat is also very versatile – witness the wide range of peat products such as soil conditioners, growing mixes, moulded pots, organic granules and seed starters.



New Brunswickers began to use peat early in the history of the province when they collected it in carts to spread around barns for animal litter. Commercial production of horticultural peat started in 1942, and has grown steadily since then.

New Brunswick peatlands contain some of the highest quality sphagnum peat moss in the world. Peatlands are common in New Brunswick, covering about 140 000 ha of land and occurring in a broad zone that stretches diagonally across the province from the northeast to the southwest. Peat mining takes place primarily in the Acadian Peninsula and east of Miramichi, in the Baie-Sainte-Anne region. New Brunswick has numerous peat producers. Some are local family operations; others are international corporations.

The peat mining season extends from mid-May to mid-September, and relies on warm sunny days to lower moisture in the peatlands. Harrowed peat is exposed to the sun and the wind, dried to about 50% moisture content, and then collected by tractor-pulled vacuum harvesters before being screened and bagged.

Some producers use mechanical block cutting machines to cut and stack blocks of peat. The blocks are dried, crushed and bagged, which leaves peat fibres more intact and creates a higher-priced product.

About 85% of the processed peat is compressed into bales. The remainder is mixed with fertilizers, fish meal, perlite or vermiculite for sale as potting soil. New Brunswick peat is shipped principally to the United States and Japan.

Interesting Facts

- *Jiffy Products (N.B.) Ltd. is Canada's only manufacturer of peat pellets.*
- *New Brunswick holds less than 1% of Canadian peatlands, but produces about 35% of the country's peat shipments.*
- *Peat can be used to manufacture extra-thin super-absorbent sanitary napkins.*
- *Peat baths have been effective in the treatment of rheumatoid arthritis.*
- *Russia, Ireland and Finland use peat to generate electricity.*

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