

Fact Sheet

What is Peat?

Peat is a dark fibrous soil created when dead plants decompose very slowly in water-logged, acidic conditions. Peat accumulates very slowly, at a rate of around 1 mm per year. Marshes, swamps, floodplains and coastal wetlands may contain peat, however, where the peat soils are greater than 30-40 cm in depth, a distinctive variety of habitats is created including bogs and fens. These habitats can take many thousands of years to form. Since things decompose very slowly in peat, bogs and fens are fantastic at preserving archaeological remains.



Why is Peat Important for Climate Change?

Peat contains huge amounts of carbon. Even though they cover just 11% of the UK, peat soils contain almost half of all the carbon locked up in soils. As long as the peat stays wet, it takes up much more carbon than it releases, which means that it helps combat climate change. However, if peat dries out then all that organic matter starts to decompose much more quickly and releases lots of carbon dioxide. The balance shifts from absorbing carbon to releasing it, exacerbating climate change.

Human Uses of Peat

Peat has a long history of being used as a fuel, flavouring and, more recently, in horticulture. While its extraction still occurs on the Somerset Levels, it's at a much lesser degree than it once was. The Government has set targets to phase out the use of peat by 2030 due to its importance as a carbon store and wildlife habitat.



Horticulture

Peat retains moisture and nutrients, which is great for growing plants.



Fuel

Peat is an excellent fuel and is still used in Ireland to provide heat and power.



Scotch Whisky

Some whiskies get a distinctive smoky flavour from barley dried over peat fires.