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Growing media – a challenge towards a sustainable future

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Abstract

Growing media are part of the solution to many challenges growers are facing today and in future – from climate change, lack of labor, degrading soils and increasing environmental constraints to plant health and food security for a growing world population. Growing in a controlled environment is more sustainable in all aspects – socially, economically and environmentally. “To grow more with less” is not only what growers are already achieving on a daily basis with protected crops, but should become the fundamental general maxim for the production of plants and food of the future. As recently stated in a study commissioned by the IPS, the global need for growing media will grow strongly. As the sector that produces these growing media, we will have to come up with a roadmap on how to satisfy this demand. Given the limited availability of the raw materials we currently use, we will need to develop new ideas on producing substrates in a responsible and efficient way. Peat is still by far our most important constituent and – as it is indeed a scarce resource - we are constantly working towards the most responsible sourcing possible. Additionally, in order to develop more sustainable growing media, other raw materials should be sourced and prepared in the most sustainable way: coir, wood fiber, compost etc. Our growing media sector will also have to continue its efforts in developing knowhow on how to use these materials in order to develop the best performing growing media. Actually, an important aspect that is often neglected in the political discussion is that fact that a growing medium with a low environmental footprint but a poor agronomic efficiency is per definition not sustainable. So research and innovation as well as a sectoral approach combining facts and education will be needed to develop answers to these challenges in a sustainable way.