

GROWERTALKS

Features

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Behind the Business: Bogs, Barges and Uncle Sam

Chris Beytes

Each month during GrowerTalks' 75th Anniversary celebration we'll reveal little-known details about the birth, growth or success of a well-known horticultural business.

This month: Sun Gro veteran John Fehr takes us back in time to the early days of peat moss harvesting in British Columbia, including the war years, when peat was critical to the military.

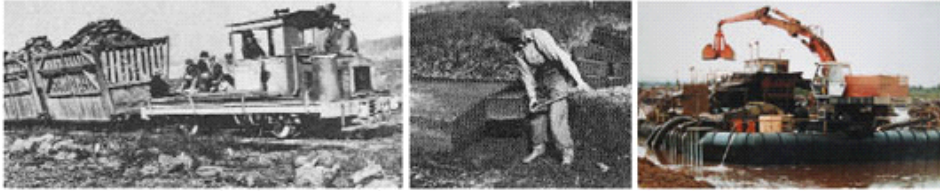
Sun Gro may today be the largest producer and distributor of peat moss and peat-based growing media in North America, but when it was founded as Western Peat Company in Vancouver, British Columbia, in 1929, it was strong backs and sharp shovels that got the business going. And it was a strange combination of a floating bog, a hovering barge and military munitions that helped build the company into what it is today.

To get the story, you can't do any better than John Fehr. John is Process and Distribution Manager for Sun Gro's Western Region, but more important is his unofficial title of company historian, which comes from his family history: His dad, David, spent 33 years with Western Peat starting in the early '50s, while John now has 37 years with the corporation. John related several interesting and little-known tidbits about Sun Gro's early days:

The floating bog

In Vancouver's Fraser River stands Lulu Island, and on Lulu Island is a large peat bog called Burns Bog, the contents of which early peat harvesters, including Western Peat, took advantage.

Until post-World War II, harvesting the peat in Burns Bog was purely physical, back-breaking labor: Workers would clear vegetation from the top of the peat, then use sharpened, square-edged spades to cut blocks of peat. The blocks were stacked to dry in the wind and sun for up to a year before being loaded onto horse-drawn wagons (later tractor-drawn, then a wire mesh conveyor system, then a narrow-gauge railroad) for the trip to the processing plant, where the blocks would be ground and compressed into bags for shipping to nurseries.



John Fehr spent one summer as engineer on the peat railway.

David Fehr digging peat back in the day.

The hovering barge, unique to Western Peat and Burns Bog.

The hovering barge

But back to digging peat on a floating bog: With traditional peat bog management, you drain the bog so you can access it. “Well, you’re not going to drain the Fraser River,” John says. So that left the hand-dig method of harvesting not possible on Lulu Island until they came up with a unique hydraulic harvesting process.

“We built what we called the hover barge, a big steel barge that had dual Allison V12 engines that ran large fans,” John recalls. “This thing worked very similarly to a hovercraft. On the front was a large clamshell digger. It would grab onto part of the bog and pull itself forward.”

If that didn’t work, they’d use large tracked vehicles with a flatbed back and a winch and pull the barge forward and abut it up against the bog where the peat was. Then the digger would dig the peat and drop it into a hopper in the center of the barge. High-pressure hoses would wash the peat away from the roots. The roots would be dropped back into where they had come from. The peat was now a slurry, and it would be pumped up to two miles away to large dewatering presses that squeezed the water out of the peat—kind of like the presses for making paper in a paper mill.

“To the best of my knowledge, that’s never been replicated anywhere,” John says. In fact the reason that the bog was eventually shut down in 1984 was the cost of harvesting became too high (the other reason was that growers wanted the long-fibered blond peat moss found in Sun Gro’s other bogs).

War helps business boom

Sun Gro is a successful corporation today, but it’s doubtful any period of peat’s popularity can beat World War II, when the U.S. government purchased vast quantities of peat for numerous military purposes, including packing material for munitions (John jokes that the grade they no doubt specified was “fluffy”).

During the peak war years, Western Peat had 1,600 employees on the payroll, according to a history of Burns Bog. A newspaper of the day reported that the local peat industry was a higher priority than shipyards, aircraft factories, or the shipping of spruce for airplanes. More than 100,000 bales of local peat were shipped to a magnesium production plant near Las Vegas. Procurement of peat was so vital to the war effort that the U.S. government at one point considered purchasing 200 acres of bog on Lulu Island.

Duck and cover

Through it all, wildlife was as drawn to Burns Bog as the peat harvesters were. In fact, John recalls that if you were going to work on the bog on the weekend, you had to be mindful of the local duck hunters (blaze orange was the uniform of the day).

In 2004, the city, province and country cooperated to fund the purchase of almost 5,000 acres of Burns Bog and set it aside as an Ecological Conservancy Area.

“Today there’s a bridge, the Alex Frasier bridge, that goes right over the top of the Burns Bog,” John says. “You can’t see too much because you’re traveling 60 miles per hour, but I always think ‘Hey, I used to work down there.’” **GT**