

GROWERTALKS

Features

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The Little-Known Sides of Premier Tech's Peat Moss Empire

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Just outside New Delhi, India, lies motor racing's newest world-class venue, the Buddh International Circuit, home of the Indian Grand Prix. Opened in 2011, the 3.2 mile circuit hosts more than 120,000 visitors, staff, racers and crews, all of whom need to make use of millions of liters of water during a race weekend. That's a lot of wastewater to treat.

Peat moss (and its derivatives) to the rescue.

Yes, peat moss. The same fluffy organic matter that makes up the majority of your growing media also makes an excellent biofiltration medium, and one of Premier Tech's divisions supplied the water treatment equipment to Buddh.

We'll bet you didn't know that about peat moss, and we'll also bet you didn't know that Premier Tech does more than \$100 million per year global sales through its Premier Tech Environmental Technologies group. In North America alone there are more than 50,000 Premier Tech "Ecoflo" systems in operation.

We learned that and much more after interviewing Bernard Belanger, who's been with Premier Tech since 1963, and has been owner and CEO since 1978. At age 77, Monsieur Belanger is still active in and enthusiastic about the business (his son, Jean, is president and Chief Operating Officer and handles their myriad international business interests).



Left: Premier Peat bales in a railroad boxcar, circa 1923.

Center: Bernard Belanger.

Right: A modern peat plant featuring Premier Tech-designed and manufactured equipment.

Peat and history

Premier Tech dates back to Germany in 1900, when it was founded by the Meyer family as Premier Peat Moss. The business grew, producing peat in Germany and Sweden and selling in Holland, France, Italy and Spain. But by the 1920s, Germany's fascist regime was also growing, making it difficult for the Jewish Meyer family to conduct business. So they diversified into the U.S., setting up a division in New York and later Canada. And they wisely moved part of their assets to the UK, where the company was operated on the family's behalf by banking giant Barclays.

In 1955, the North American division of Premier became the official owners. Bernard joined the company in 1963; in 1978, he took over Premier and all its North American assets.

Peat and Technology

In 1968, Premier introduced Pro-Mix, developed using the now-famous soilless media research done at Cornell University. You probably know Pro-Mix—Bernard says the word in North America is synonymous with potting mix the way “Kleenex” means tissue. Premier Tech's Horticulture and Agriculture group, in fact, generates \$275 million per year.

To ensure that business remains strong into the future, Premier Tech Horticulture is also a pioneer and leader in the restoration and regeneration of harvested peat bogs and the protection of those ecosystems. They actively participate and lead the way in Canadian and international efforts toward responsible peatland management. Bernard says he could take you to peat bogs that are so beautifully restored, you would never know they had been harvested for decades.

The experience that Premier Tech has gained in the field of sphagnum peat moss has allowed the company to expand beyond the raw materials (peat) into additional fields, the first of which is harvesting and packaging equipment. They not only invent, design and manufacture all their own equipment for peat moss production, bagging and distribution, but also manufacture and sell all sorts of packaging machinery for a wide range of industries, including peat.

And lastly, as mentioned above, wastewater treatment via peat-based biofiltration systems, which has, in turn, led to the development of other water treatment technologies.

All of this new science requires R&D, or what Premier Tech called IR&D—Innovation, Research And Development. It's been a part of their culture for more than 30 years; and today they have more than 225 scientists, engineers and staff devoted to IR&D worldwide. They've generated more than 100 patents and invested nearly \$240 million over the last 20 years.

Peat and Water

But most fascinating of Premier Tech's divisions is the aforementioned water treatment. Bernard relates the story that in 1983, a university researcher contacted him and told him peat moss is a very good biofiltration medium. Bernard says that he had read a bit about the topic but wanted to know more. According to university studies, peat moss has both a large surface area and high porosity, which makes it ideal for air and water filtration. In addition, it provides physical, biochemical and microbiological reactions that combine to purify water that's passed through it. "It is very simple and very efficient," Bernard says.

It's amazing that \$475 million in business and all that research investment revolves around one simple product.

"Our roots, our beginning, is peat moss," Bernard says. "Everything we are doing touches the peat." **GT**