

GUEST BLOG:

THE PLANT POT PARADOX

By Anthony Clarke
Pöppelmann



Whilst plant pots are perhaps quite a niche area of plastics manufacturing, hundreds of millions each year find their way into households, and subsequently into the waste and recycling streams.

Generally, plant pots are made of polypropylene and until a few years ago they were predominately black from a carbon-based pigment. This made them undetectable by sorting equipment and therefore unsuitable for kerbside recycling. The war on plastic that erupted in 2018 made many major growers (and the retailers they supplied) question how a “green” industry could be responsible for sending so much plastic to landfill, and more or less overnight growers decided they wanted “kerbside recyclable” pots.

Manufacturers that didn’t already have suitable options moved rapidly to introduce detectable colours and growers, especially those supplying garden centres and the multiples, were quick to adopt the recyclable options. This involved a lot of experimentation and testing (and cost) but now virtually all plants grown for the retail market in the UK are produced in detectable pots with grey and taupe as the predominant colours.

Despite the challenges this seems like a fantastic example of the supply chain adapting to improve recyclability, but.....

In 2018 a survey of local authorities by horticultural trade magazine Hort Week found that a huge 87% of those that responded would not accept plant pots in any form.

Given the extra cost of the detectable pots this was a contentious issue with growers who felt they were just paying more for a product with the same recycling outcome as before. Growers, manufactures, the main industry body the HTA (Horticultural Trades Association) and RECOUP lobbied government, recyclers and local authorities to promote the move to detectable pots. WRAP changed their guidance to state “non-black plant pots should be included in collections” and OPRL deemed pots suitable to carry the “widely recycled” logo as it was at the time and subsequently “recycle”. Finally, after a long campaign it was announced by DEFRA in the latter part of last year that (detectable PP) plant pots would be included in collections under the simpler recycling scheme.

So the sector had that happy ending after all? Actually, no. A repeat survey by Hort Week at the end of August 2024 found only 8% of authorities that responded now accept plant pots, a 5% shift in the wrong direction!

Even more frustrating is the fact that many councils also stated to Hort Week that they have no plans to follow DEFRA’s directive any time soon. Many of the reasonings given such as “Plastic plant pots are difficult to recycle due to the type of plastic from which they are made” and “Most councils unfortunately don’t accept plant pots for kerbside recycling (and as far as we understand are unlikely to in the immediate future) because they are made from a type of plastic that is not currently accepted at sorting facilities” were very misguided and quite alarming.

While neatly falling into the “pots, tubs and trays” category for recycling, it seems the suffix “plant” creates an irrational fear causing most local authorities to specifically state plant pots cannot be included in kerbside collections. This seemingly with no real logical or consistent reasoning. If we switch off the punch that makes the drainage holes in the plant pot and print “yoghurt” on the side instead of geranium, the same “pot” suddenly becomes recyclable!

Alongside all this there has also been a constant pressure on growers from major retailers and groups to find “green” alternatives to plastic pots. This is perhaps driven by the desire to appease consumers and NGOs who have been brainwashed into thinking anything that is plastic must be bad, and that any alternative must be better. The fact that most pots whether kerbside recyclable

or not currently still end up in residual waste as local authorities can't or won't recycle only adds to this pressure.

(As an aside this is not to say alternative materials should be ignored, we constantly evaluate other options, and there may indeed be certain specific scenarios where they may have a role.)

When looking at material options it is important to look at the whole picture. Often the focus seems to be on end of life, maybe because it is the bit the consumer sees, but we should not overlook the environmental impact of manufacturing the raw material and subsequent processing.

Effects on shelf life and wastage also needs to be considered, as in most cases the environmental footprint of growing a plant and delivering it through the supply chain will be a far greater than the pot itself.

Also it is generally accepted that a move to a circular economy is far better than linear material flows which many of the alternatives to plastic pots can be. The easy recyclability of detectable polypropylene plant pots is what should make them a sustainable choice.

We need to let all those pots (and it amounts to many tens of thousands of tonnes) to have their second (and third and fourth ...) life and allow them to be truly circular.

Lets hope that those local authorities that have no idea what a plant pot is made of and how easy they are to recycle will take note and get their recycling mojo on so that all that lovely polypropylene can finally be captured and used many more times.

Just as a foot note, perhaps we should also mention re-use. There are certainly areas of plant production where this may, with adaptations, be viable particularly for some of the grower's internal processes but we are still a long way from a plant pot DRS. Or are we?



Opinions expressed by external contributors may not reflect RECOUP positions. While every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of the contents of this publication, RECOUP cannot accept responsibility or liability for any errors or omissions.