

Stories from Oyster Gardeners

Donating Your Oysters

In some areas you can donate your oysters to sanctuary reefs where the oysters cannot be harvested and are left to serve as brood stock and habitat for other marine creatures. The Chesapeake Bay Foundation (CBF) holds “Oyster Round-Ups” at various locations throughout Virginia from mid-July through mid-September where you can donate your oysters. Please pre-register for the Oyster Round-Ups on the CBF website: www.cbf.org/how-we-save-the-bay/programs-initiative/hampton-roads-virginia/oyster-restoration/oyster-gardening/returning-gardeners-round-up-registration.

Another option, if you have hard, sandy bottom nearby, is to place your large oysters on the bottom. Eventually you may be able to build an oyster reef. You could put your clean, empty shell on the bottom as well. Huge oyster reefs along many of Virginia’s shorelines once provided protection from erosion by breaking the wave energy before it hit the shore. These reefs create a “living shoreline” where plants and animals can thrive. A living shoreline is of far greater



Volunteers with the Chesapeake Bay Foundation spread a crop of oysters on a protected reef in Virginia Beach’s Lynnhaven River. Photo courtesy of CBF.

ecological benefit than a bulkhead or rip rap and under moderate to low wave energy conditions can provide the same protection from erosion.



Photo by Brian Wood.

"Children love oyster gardening! Oysters attract a microcosm of aquatic life and teaching children about the ecology of oysters is one of the most gratifying aspects of oyster gardening."

- Jackie Partin,
TOGA

"Ten years ago, my wife and I took the TOGA oyster gardening course at VIMS. We learned all about the process of growing oysters, and built our first Taylor float with the assistance of the TOGA instructors. We then started growing oysters under our dock on Whays Creek off the Great Wicomico River. Since then, we have added seven more Taylor floats, and we now plant 2000 oysters every year. Oyster gardening has been the perfect hobby for us. It has given us the chance to grow oysters both to eat and to plant in our oyster bed that we lease from the state, and it has enabled us to contribute significantly to the health of our creek. We also have enjoyed teaching our friends and colleagues at work about the fascinating process of oyster gardening. Thanks, TOGA!"

- Ted Ellett



George Miller working with oysters from his oyster garden on Nanci Reeves’ dock. The Millers work cooperatively with the Reeves on their oyster gardens. Photo by Maryethel Miller.

"After our son completed his Virginia Tech masters thesis on oysters, we decided it was time to get into the fun! Not only do we feel as if we are helping the environment in a small way but learning about the oyster is fascinating. What a great and rewarding experience it has been, to say nothing of the delicious meals!"

- Maryethel and George Miller

“My wife and I own a home in Irvington VA and have been oyster gardeners for over ten years. I have learned a lot about our most famous bi-valve,...enjoy sharing them with friends who visit, and being a mini-expert about how to grow them plus their value in purifying the water. I have written two magazine articles on the subject and gotten at least four friends to take up the hobby; not a lot of work or expense, tasty to eat, and something that is fun to share with others”.

- Marshall Orr

“I have been oyster farming on the Rappahannock in Urbanna, Virginia for nine years for my personal (and friend’s) consumption. I currently have 500 oysters in my seed float and 300 larger oysters in two other floats. I usually average about 500 oysters at any one time and estimate that over the past nine years, my oysters have filtered over 80 million gallons of Rappahannock river water. If everyone that had river front property would raise oysters as I do, the bay would be crystal clear again!”

- Mark Mikuta

“We got our first oyster spat at the TOGA Workshop in Christchurch 7 years ago. Once we realized how fast they grow, we were hooked! We set them out to grow in April and we ate them for New Year’s – just 8 months



Mark Mikuta displaying some of his oysters from his float (on the right). Photo by Sherry Mikuta

later. Roasted Oysters Rockefeller is one of our favorite ways to eat them. We’ve taken them from our river house in Lancaster County to our friends and family in Richmond, the Outer Banks, New Jersey and Cape Cod – they’ve become quite famous!

We put all the shell back in the water and now after all these years, we’re getting some spatfall on the shell and some of the oysters out there are now 5 years old. The river otters have been enjoying them too – they get the wild ones and then use our Taylor floats as their dining table. We know because they don’t clear the “dishes” after they eat!

- The Donahue Family



Jeff Donahue and daughter Ellie Boyd with their Taylor float. Photo by Laura McKay.



Oysters from the Donahue family floats. Photo by Laura McKay.

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“After completing the Master Oyster Gardener Course in 1999, my goal has been to restore a self-sustaining oyster population along the shoreline at Bay Point in Poquoson. This would be my oyster garden. I implemented three strategies:

- Deploying oyster shell cultch to restore habitat as oyster reefs and beds.

- Recruiting natural seed using net bags and cages containing oyster shell cultch and planting the seed laden shell on restored habitat annually.

- Husbandry of disease tolerant brood stock oysters from local waters kept in cages to help populate existing habitat.

Some of Julian Cox's brood stock naturals (wild oysters) kept in cages hanging from his dock. Photo by Brian Lockwood.



One of the numerous clumps of oysters present on the oyster reef along the shoreline of Lyons Creek.

The oyster reef supports a diverse and abundant population of marine life. Photo by Brian Lockwood.



Primary habitat restoration was accomplished from 2000 – 2008. Since then, selected reefs expanded, recruitment and planting of seed on shell on restored habitat, and the husbandry of best of

breed brood stock naturals continues. The abundance of oysters cleansing local waters and providing prime habitat for many other beneficial marine plants and animals has increased dramatically. From 2005 to 2008 my neighbor Brian Lockwood and I restored the oyster habitat and population along the Bay Point shoreline of Lyons Creek. Moreover, the sloped shoreline oyster reef help mitigate shoreline erosion caused by increased boat traffic and coastal storms, and protect valuable wetlands. The ecological services provided by the self-sustaining oyster population in our gardens improve water quality for the benefit of all”

- Julian Cox



Many large oysters, from 4 to 6 inches in length observed growing on the sloped shoreline oyster reef along Lyons Creek indicate a healthy oyster population. This oyster reef was likely populated with progeny from some of Julian Cox's brood stock oysters grown through oyster gardening. Photo by Brian Lockwood.

School Children Growing Oysters

Teachers are showing students that they CAN make a difference in our environment. Each year, Oyster Reef Keepers of Virginia (ORKV) provides schools in coastal Virginia with the opportunity to participate in a student oyster restoration program called "Schools Restoring Oysters to the Chesapeake." This program engages 8,350 students from 167 K-12 grade classes each year in a Bay-wide effort to restore the oyster population. As of 2013, 99,700 students have contributed a remarkable 6.1 million oysters to sanctuary reefs in Virginia. This project takes a hands-on approach to education, allows students to execute authentic science, is based on scientifically sound restoration strategies, and meets multiple Virginia Standards of Learning.

Each September, classes receive 2,000 baby oysters from ORKV and deploy them in Taylor Floats near their school. Each month, students visit their oysters and measure their growth rates and mortality and monitor the water chemistry. They clean and maintain their oysters and containers, and identify natural and human-induced actions that may impact oysters and water quality. At the end of the school year, classes transplant their oysters onto sanctuary reefs where they will spawn and provide offspring to revitalize future oyster generations.

By growing and transplanting oysters, students gain knowledge of ecology, oyster biology, and water quality.



Students transplanting oysters. Photo courtesy of ORKV.

They also get a chance to take part in authentic scientific research and learn field sampling techniques. In addition to academic skills, students gain a connection to our coast and an empowering sense that they have the ability to improve it.

Oyster Reef Keepers of Virginia provides teachers with a training workshop, oysters, water chemistry equipment, a Taylor Float, and classroom curricula and teaching resources, all for \$200. Teachers interested in joining the program should contact Laurie Carroll Sorabella at Oyster Reef Keepers of Virginia at oysterreefkeeper@yahoo.com or at 757-460-1200, or visit their upcoming web site www.orkv.org.

Stories from Teachers and Students

"I love the Schools Restoring Oysters to the Chesapeake project. It's a great way to promote environmentalism, teach science, and have fun with the students."

- **Joleen Zackowski**, Granby High School in Norfolk

"My class is participating in Oyster Reef Keepers of Virginia's "Schools Restoring Oysters to the Chesapeake" program. By raising oysters, I have discovered that oysters provide great habitat for fish, shrimp, crabs and sponges. In the fall, my class found 23 different species that use our oysters for habitat. It's exciting to touch and hold the critters that we are helping. Next week, our class is going on a boat to transplant the oysters into the

Lynnhaven River. I like it that when we raise oysters, we are saving the earth."

- **Quinn Carroll**, 1st grade

"There is no better way to teach students how to live sustainably than to get their hands dirty raising oysters. They learn how they can get involved and make a positive impact in the world, in addition to learning science and math... This project is something that will stay with them and hopefully transform who they are and who they will become."

- **Melissa Follin**, Glenwood Elementary School in Virginia Beach

