

Step Four: Purchase Supplies

When buying seed, it's important for the oyster gardener to be sure that it comes from a hatchery that has the best available brood stocks. You should try to obtain oysters with a proven record of good growth and survival in areas where disease is prevalent. While disease tolerant oyster lines have been developed, it is unlikely that a fully disease resistant oyster will ever be produced.

Vendors for oyster seed and containment systems change frequently but you should be able to locate one close to you, no matter where you are along Virginia's coast. See Reference C on page 24 for Web site addresses for the Tidewater Oyster Gardeners' Association (TOGA) and the Chesapeake Bay Foundation (CBF). The TOGA web site lists many vendors for seed and gear. TOGA's site also provides contact information for Master Oyster Gardeners (MOGs). You may want to contact a MOG near you for advice on the best seed and container sources, as well as for advice on oyster gardening in general. The CBF web site also gives you a list of suppliers organized by geographic region within Virginia and some, out-of-state mail order suppliers.

What will it cost?

You could spend anywhere from \$60 to \$140 to start your garden. It all depends on the size of seed, the type of containment system you buy and how many oysters you want to grow. For the most up-to-date information and prices, go to the Web sites for CBF and TOGA listed on page 24 under "Oyster Gardening Web Sites."

A bag of 1000 seed oysters can cost from \$25 - \$60. The larger the seed you buy the more expensive it will be. But the upside is you will not need to use small mesh bags, predation from crabs will be less of a problem, and the oysters will be large enough to eat sooner. Some suppliers will even ship the seed to you.



A bag of 1000 oyster seed of varying sizes. Photo courtesy of TOGA.

Your containment system costs will probably be the more expensive part of your garden. On the high end of costs are prefabricated Taylor floats. They can cost \$80 to \$115 for 2'x3'x1' or 4'x6'x1' floats. Plus, you will have to buy mesh bags for your small oysters. However, if you can build a float yourself, the Taylor float materials should only cost about \$50-\$60. But be careful to construct it properly so that it doesn't sink. You will need hand tools such as a pig-ring tool, a wire cutter, a saw for cutting the PVC pipe and a method for bending the wire mesh. TOGA conducts an annual float-building workshop in September where you can learn to build your own floats.

Floats, bottom cages and hanging cages smaller than the Taylor float cost from \$30 to \$60. In addition you will need to buy about 6 mesh bags at \$4-6 each. You will start your oysters in 2 of the bags with the largest mesh that will retain the spat you purchased, and eventually move them into the other 4 bags as they grow. So if you start with 1000 seed oysters, you'll end up with about 250 oysters in each of the four larger bags.

Growing oysters in mesh bags alone may be the least expensive option. You can buy a \$40 mesh bag kit with one bag having small mesh size for small seed oysters and five bags with large mesh size for use as your oysters grow. Each 2'x3' bag will hold 200 harvest-size oysters and you supply the 2-liter plastic bottles to use as floats.

It may cost more to produce oysters in your garden the first year compared to buying them in the store, but, don't forget you are adding filter feeders to Virginia's waters and a "nursery" where tiny fish can hide, and you can go out and harvest your oysters whenever you like!

Contact information for hatcheries that provide oyster seed or "spat," can be found at the Tidewater Oyster Gardeners Association (TOGA) "Spat Center" at: www.oystergardener.org/#!/spat-center/c845



An assembled oyster cage. Photo courtesy of TOGA.

