

A HOME & GARDEN

Home Guide



Oyster gardens offer state hope

By Kate Rossi-Snook
and Dr. Gulnihal Ozbay

It is a beautiful summer morning, the sun is shining, and the water is calm — it is the perfect day to tend to your floating garden. At the end of your dock is a habitat teeming with life; a menagerie of fish and blue crabs, eels and oysters — yes, oysters.

“Oyster gardening” has taken root across the coastal mid-Atlantic region in an effort to restore the native oyster populations for their ecological and commercial contribution to the health and viability of coastal estuaries.

Many community-based estuary programs have turned to the method of involving volunteers to help rear larval oysters into healthy adults for restoration. With the Delaware Center for the Inland Bays, community members throughout southern Delaware are being given the unique opportunity to observe firsthand many of the important ecological services provided by oysters.

The Delaware Center for the Inland Bays, a nonprofit organization established to facilitate a long-term approach for the stewardship and enhancement of the Inland Bays watershed, initiated its oyster gardening program in the summer of 2003.

Since then, the Delaware Sea Grant Marine Advisory Program and Delaware State University have facilitated the expansion of the program, which has grown to more than 100 participants in just four years.

This swell in the program's popularity is in response to many Delaware homeowners wishing their canals and waterways could return to their former glory — clean, safe, and filled with life. After decades of development in the surrounding area, Delaware's Inland Bays have become overrun with sediment and nutrient pollution and have become in-



Submitted photo

These oysters have been harvested by Delaware State University for research.

sufficient in supporting the diversity of organisms that were once plentiful.

Oysters clean the water for other animals by filtering sediments, algae and additional nutrients from the water column for food. However, the water quality has become so degraded over the years that the oyster populations have declined dramatically, adding to the bays' problems.

Oyster gardeners hope that by reestablishing the oyster populations in the bays, Delaware's waterways can be healthy once more. Many commercially and recreationally important fishes and crustaceans live in and around the oyster cages and floats at selected waters of the three Inland Bays — Rehoboth, Indian River, and Little Assawoman — according to the studies of Dr. Gulnihal Ozbay and her research group.

“This is obviously due to the contribution of oysters and how they enhance diversity and habitat value where they exist,” said Dr. Ozbay, project director and assistant research professor at

“spat,” and the floating cage in which you will raise them.

The resulting larger, healthier oysters are able to be used for restoration work in the area such as artificial reef creation and rip-rap planting, and will contribute spat to enhance the struggling wild populations.

This past growing season, requests for participation in and training for oyster gardening have more than doubled, and interest and participation is expected to continue to increase every year with the growing success of the program. To become an oyster gardener, contact the Center for the Inland Bays at wildlife@inlandbays.org.

Editor's note: Dr. Gulnihal Ozbay is an assistant research professor and Katie Ross-Snook is a research technician in the Department of Agriculture and Natural Resources at Delaware State University. For more information about how oysters filter and help improve aquatic habitat, contact Dr. Ozbay at gozbay@desu.edu or (302) 853-6476; or John Ewart of the University of Delaware Sea Grant Program at ewart@UDel.Edu.

Garden Tales

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Oyster gardening is a simple and enjoyable step towards achieving these goals. To take part in the program, the center for the Inland Bays will provide you with baby oysters, called