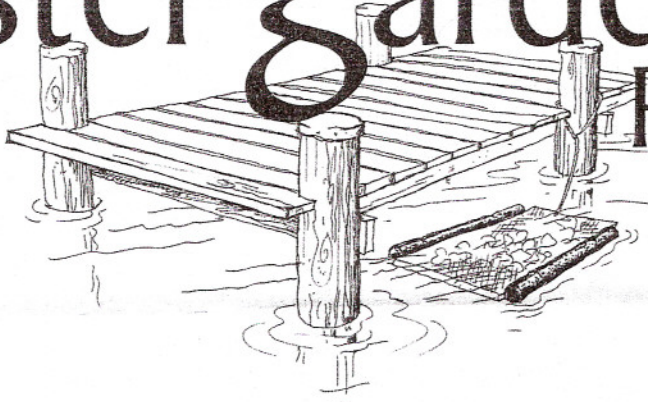




OysterCorps
Virginia

Oyster Gardening FAQs



In Colonial times, the Chesapeake Bay's oyster population formed towering reefs that supported thriving biological communities—for years oysters were the most valuable commercial fishery in the Bay. But in a little over a century, overfishing, disease, and pollution have nearly eradicated the Bay's oyster population, and today it is a mere 2 percent of its historic level.

The oyster is a keystone species, meaning it is exceptionally important to the Chesapeake's ecosystem, and the decimation of oysters has contributed greatly to the precarious state of the Bay's overall health. Like filters in a giant fish tank, oysters purify the Bay as they strain algae from the water for their food. Oyster reefs also provide habitat and food for scores of marine plants and animals.

Grow Oysters Alongside Your Dock

The Chesapeake Bay Foundation's (CBF) oyster gardening program gives individuals the opportunity to help bring back this vital species by using the area alongside their docks to grow oysters. Once grown, the oysters are returned to CBF so they can be planted on sanctuary reefs where they continue to mature, filter water, and reproduce. Since 1996, CBF and its partners have grown or transplanted nearly 10 million oysters and have helped build or restock 33 reefs. But achieving CBF's goal to increase oysters tenfold in the Bay by 2010 will require the dedication of thousands of volunteer gardeners.

This brochure answers some of the most common questions about oyster gardening in Virginia. For information about oyster gardening in Maryland, please contact Stephanie Reynolds at sreynolds@cbf.org or call 410/268-8816.



CHESAPEAKE BAY FOUNDATION

Save the Bay

www.cbf.org/virginiaoysters

Oyster Gardening FAQs

How does the Oyster Gardening Program work?

As a first-time oyster gardener, you will attend a one-hour workshop to learn about oyster restoration and how to care for your oysters. Before you begin the workshop, you will need to purchase either a Taylor Float or float bags from an aquaculture vendor. When you leave the workshop, you will have everything you need to grow oysters, including 1000 seed oysters per float. You then tend these oysters for about a year. Keeping oysters in floats gives them maximum exposure to oxygen and plankton, their food source, which means they will grow faster than they would in their natural habitat on the Bay bottom. As a result, these big, twelve-month-old oysters have a head start on those planted directly from the hatchery to reefs. You will return your oysters to CBF after a year so they can be placed on a state sanctuary reef, an area from which oysters cannot be harvested. At the same time, you can pick up new oyster seed to begin the growing cycle for the next year. We hope that each gardener will continue growing oysters year after year.

What type of dock and water conditions do I need to grow oysters?

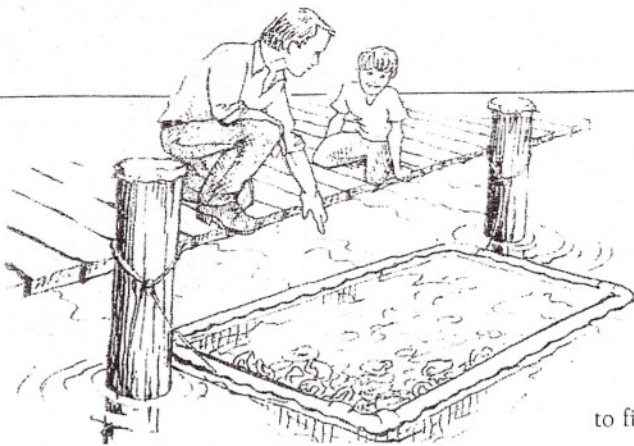
You must have access to water with a salinity of at least five to ten parts per thousand year-round for your oysters to thrive. Most places in the Bay meet this requirement, but there are some “boundaries” beyond which oysters will not thrive. To determine if your area meets this requirement, look for evidence of other oysters growing nearby (for example, oyster shells along the shore, or oysters growing on pilings). If you can taste the salt in your creek water, there is generally enough salt to grow oysters. Your oysters will not thrive:

- Upriver from Hog Island in the James River;
- Upriver from West Point in the York River (Pamunkey or Mattaponi River);
- Upriver from Tappahannock in the Rappahannock River; or
- Above the Route 301 Bridge on the Potomac River.

Your site must also have a minimum water depth of one foot, even during extreme weather conditions, because oysters can die if exposed to freezing air. Interestingly, oysters can be frozen solid in the water and survive, but they will die if exposed to freezing air. If winter tides and winds combine to push the water in your creek below the one-foot level when the air temperature is below freezing, your oysters are at risk of freezing.

You can tie your float to a dock, pier, bulkhead, or pilings.

Oysters can be grown at a marina, community dock, vacation home, or friend's house on the Chesapeake in Virginia as long as you tend the oysters regularly.



A Taylor float, pictured left, is one type of garden you can build for growing oysters. It measures about 4' x 2'.

This includes keeping an eye on them all winter long. So if you don't have a dock or conditions are not right at your dock, try partnering with a friend, neighbor, or local waterfront business to find access to a suitable site.

How much time can I expect to spend tending my oysters, and what other commitments are involved?

Oyster floats need to be kept clean. When the weather is warm (May through September), you can expect to clean your oysters about once every two weeks. Each cleaning takes about two hours. Whenever oysters are feeding (approximately April through November), you should shake or tumble them every few days to dislodge any sediment. This takes only a few minutes. Wash or clean detritus from the float's wire cage to promote good water flow to the oysters. During the winter months, you should keep an eye on your float to make sure ice flows and severe weather do not damage it.

And please BRING BACK YOUR OYSTERS!

CBF will set up dates and locations where you can bring in your grown oysters and pick up new oyster seed for the next year. We want to make sure your adult oysters join those that are living, filtering, and reproducing on sanctuary oyster reefs, so please bring them back to us.

Where will my oysters end up once I return them to the Chesapeake Bay Foundation?

CBF will plant your oysters on sanctuary reefs in Virginia's portion of the Chesapeake Bay. We generally put oysters on reefs on or near the river in which they were grown, and this is done in close coordination with state officials at the Virginia Marine Resources Commission.

Can I eat the oysters I grow?

The oyster gardening program is designed to help restore native oysters to the Chesapeake. As such, oysters grown through the program must be returned to CBF for planting on sanctuary reefs. Also, the Virginia Department of Health, through the Division of Shellfish Sanitation, warns against eating oysters grown from private piers for health reasons. CBF asks all volunteers to heed this warning and not eat any of the oysters they grow through this program.



How can I get started in oyster gardening? Is there any cost to participate in the oyster gardening program?

Register for one of the oyster gardening workshops scheduled each year beginning in early summer. A donation of \$25* per 1000 seed oysters helps cover the cost of the program and the oysters. Next, you need to purchase a Taylor Float or float bags from an aquaculture vendor, which costs \$50-\$90. A list of vendors is in the information packet. Then, you should complete and submit the two-page "Abbreviated Joint Permit Application for Non-Commercial Riparian Shellfish Aquaculture Structures." This is a Virginia requirement to ensure that the Commonwealth can inform all gardeners about the water quality in their particular creek or waterway. For a copy of this form and a complete information packet, please contact CBF's Hampton Roads office at 757/622-1964.

*The \$25 donation helps CBF prepare your seed for growing. This donation is considered tax-deductible to the fullest extent of the law. Volunteers understand that all oysters provided by CBF are to be returned at the end of the growing season.

What else can I do to help Save the Bay?

CBF has lots of ways that you can help Save the Bay. If oyster gardening is not quite right for you, or if you'd like to learn more about our other volunteer activities, please visit our website at cbf.org/take_action.

Another great way to help is to sign up for CBF's online Action Network at cbf.org and join the thousands of other online activists already helping to protect and restore the Chesapeake Bay. Through timely e-mail action alerts about important Bay issues, the Action Network makes it easy for you to contact your decision makers and urge them to take action. You'll also receive CBF's monthly *On the Bay* e-newsletter, quarterly *BaySavers Bulletin*, and important Bay news. It's free, it's easy, and we will not share your e-mail address.

For more information, dates, and times of workshops near you, call 757/622-1964, visit cbf.org/virginiaoysters, or e-mail hamptonroads@cbf.org



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