

Produce maps D2-3

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Fields of Plenty

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AN UNDERWATER GARDEN



Chris and Jennifer Barker swing a mesh cage of oysters into place in their tidal "garden." The Samish Island couple use plastic ties to fasten the cages in place.

Clams and oysters fresh from the sea



The difference between a clam raised in a tidelands “garden” (on right) and naturally occurring clams. All were grown in Samish Bay; however the one on the right, with the two-color shell, was grown in a protected bed. The difference in color is because of the kind of clam used.

*“Give me oysters and beer
for dinner ev’ry day of the year,
and I’ll feel fine, I’ll feel fine.”*

Lyrics from the Jimmy Buffett song “Tin Cup Chalice,” scrawled on Jennifer and Chris Barker’s kitchen blackboard.

Jennifer and Chris Barker dug into the tide flat in front of their home on Samish Island and began harvesting clams they had been raising for almost three years in their undersea garden.

“It’s addictive, when you start looking for them,” said Jennifer, 34. “Then it’s like, ‘Oh, we dug up way too much.’”

The couple has been growing clams, oysters and geoducks for about three years. Their muddy thumbs, so to speak, net plenty of shellfish for dinner about two or three times a week.

The Barkers’ tide flat on Padilla Bay is located down a steep flight of steps just across the road from their house. Several houses west of a historic oyster processing plant, they have set up their mesh bags of oysters and buried their clams and geoducks.

“It’s exactly like vegetable gardening, except you go out and dig in the mud,” Jennifer said.

Growing seafood, so to speak, is a hobby that’s catching on in west-

ern Washington, said Bill Dewey, who owns a clam farm in Samish Bay and is the president of the Skagit Conservation Education Alliance.

Dewey estimates between 200 and 300 Washingtonians grow their own shellfish. That estimate doesn’t include people, such as those living along Hood Canal, who harvest mollusks deposited by Mother Nature near their homes.

Taylor Shellfish Farms holds a “seed” sale each summer where people can buy small geoducks, clams and oysters — about the size of a man’s thumbnail — to plant in their tidal lands.

Taylor measures the popularity of tidal gardening in sales. Last year, top day seed sales were 120 transactions, Dewey said. This year, the company has rung up around 200 sales at its Shelton store.

“People enjoy it,” Dewey said. “People get really excited.”

It’s a low-maintenance hobby, he said. Shellfish gardeners just need to check their clam beds, geoduck tubes and oyster bags every few tidal cycles.

“It’s kind of fun to watch them grow,” Dewey said.

Jennifer Barker said she and her husband just brush algae and eelgrass off the netting and the mesh bags, called aquapurses, that hold

the oysters. They also open the oyster bags regularly to ensure the mollusks are growing evenly and that a small crab or oyster drill didn’t sneak inside.

The Barkers’ clam beds are covered with a netting similar to that used to protect strawberries from birds.

Crabs, starfish, other shell-wearing sea creatures and some ducks have a taste for shellfish. For instance, an oyster drill will punch a small hole through the mollusk’s shell and suck the meat from the outside.

Chris Barker, 42, jokes that the worst predators aren’t ducks or crabs. No, the worst are water skiers. He has set up buoys in hopes boats will avoid the area when it is submerged at high tide. The Barkers use regular gardening tools, plastic zip-ties, wire cutters and five-gallon buckets to haul away their dinner.

The couple plants “seed” once a year. The Barkers already have positioned plastic tubes in the mud to protect this year’s batch of

geoducks. Taylor Shellfish Farms sells the seed each summer during extremely low tides. That’s because the farther an “underwater garden” is from the beach, the better for the mollusks.

“The biggest rush is after the seed sale,” Jennifer said. “You’re racing the tide.”

Habit forming

The Barkers first heard about shellfish farming as a hobby when they participated in a watershed class, offered by the Skagit Conservation Education Alliance. The alliance is a nonprofit group created about 15 years ago to work with the county to protect Skagit’s water quality and watersheds.

The Barkers toured Taylor Shellfish Farms on Samish Bay off Chuckanut Drive, along with the rest of their watershed class, heard about the seed sale and were intrigued.

The couple loves shellfish. Before they began to raise their own, the Barkers ate oysters, clams

or other mollusks monthly.

“We were sort of scratching our chins and thinking, we eat so much shellfish, we’d probably save some money,” Chris Barker said.

They also were interested in protecting Padilla Bay’s water quality. Shellfish filter excess nutrients from the water, which benefits other species of sea creatures, Dewey said.

The Barkers’ first year growing shellfish wasn’t as successful as their second. There are several different ways to rear shellfish, Chris said, and they just needed to figure out what works in Padilla Bay. The first year, the Barkers tried setting some of their oyster bags directly on the surface of the mud flats. But most everything on the ground died, he said.

The Barkers said mesh baskets, called aquapurses, suspended on ropes seem to work best. This summer, they will try suspending some aquapurses from rebar in hopes the metal will prove stronger than

Shellfish: Gardening isn't unique to Washington state

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the rope during storms. The couple hasn't tasted the geoducks yet because they take a few years to mature.

But they've been enjoying the clams and oysters about two or three times a week. They barbecue the oysters with garlic and sauté the clams in butter, garlic, onions and white wine.

"It's a bad habit," Chris Barker said with a grin. "Now, we can support our habit."

They harvest whenever they are hungry for several mouthfuls of mollusk.

"Sometimes we can't keep up with it — they grow so fast," Jennifer Barker said.

Natural filter

Shellfish gardening isn't unique to Washington.

It started on the Chesapeake Bay after disease and water quality issues decimated the oyster population there, Dewey said.

For a number of years, the Chesapeake watermen lobbied

heavily for oyster-friendly regulations. But it wasn't until many lay-people began growing their own shellfish that water quality became a concern for residents and dramatic changes were made in public policy, Dewey said.

"They realized the oysters were a keystone species," Dewey said. "When the interest in the oysters went mainstream, and not just the watermen, everyone understood the link between oysters and water quality."

Dewey said he'd like to see something similar happen in western Washington. That's one of the reasons the conservation alliance has introduced people who enroll in its watershed class to shellfish farming.

The more residents learn about growing and eating their own shellfish, the more they will test to ensure their septic systems work, pick up after their pets on the beach and watch the amount of fertilizer that runs into the streams, Dewey said.

"If we could get an army



Photos by Frank Varga / Skagit Valley Herald

Jennifer and Chris Barker walk back home with their harvest of oysters and clams from their waterfront. They began growing shellfish about three years ago.

of people growing on their beach, we could get a whole lot of people working for water quality," Dewey said. "To eat them, you need to make sure your septic system works and your neighbor's septic system works."

Bacteria in some of Skagit's waterways is a concern for shellfish farmers and tideland gardeners.

During the past 10 years, high levels of fecal coliform bacteria have been found in the surface water of the Bay View area. Both state and county health department officials say these tests indicate some septic systems in the community have failed.

Residents dispute the test results, and some even question the need for the tests.

Still, commercial shellfish harvesting was banned in 2001 on both Padilla and Similk bays

coliform bacteria. Samish Bay is one of 23 beaches that the state Health Department has listed this May as under threat of closure because of water quality and pollution in the area.

Concerns about water quality have prompted the Barkers to make sure their shellfish are well cooked, although they say they both enjoy raw oysters.

So far, none of their Samish neighbors have planted a tidal

garden.

"They've showed a lot of interest, but they see us out here digging in the rain," Chris said.

He and Jennifer grinned. They don't mind getting muddy for mollusks.

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Shellfish growing at low tide in protective mesh on Padilla Bay.

FRAZIER FARMS

Local
SWEET CORN

Across the street from Home Depot in Burlington opening mid-August

PUMPKINS

U-pick or We pick
Just West of Sim's Honda opening late September

WATCH FOR SIGNS Open Daily 9am - dusk