



[Photo/Alex von Klevdorff. Canal Beach Westport](#)

SHELLFISHING: Go local, go green

Editor's note: Today The Hour starts a 10-part series on shellfishing, both recreational and professional. Shellfishing is a part of our local maritime history and remains a vital part of local industry and community. The series will be written in column form by local shellfishing expert Rindy Higgins and they mean to educate. This first column in the series will be a go-local introduction to shellfishing in our area. Upcoming columns will range from how to get started and where to get a permit to how to prepare and eat them. We will also look at the history and economic impact of the oyster beds in our region and finally explore how our shellfish are celebrated at local festivals - the ChowderFest and the Norwalk Seaport Association Oyster Festival.

By Rindy Higgins
Special to The Hour

With two full years of locally generated data now available to the Westport Shellfish Commission, some surprising and encouraging findings are emerging. Last year, more than 1,000 permits were issued to people wanting to shellfish recreationally in Westport's waters, a 14 percent increase over the year before.

The Shellfish Commission is appointed by the First Selectman, and is charged with recommending policy choices that sustain one of the town's most precious and enjoyable resources: Its offshore shellfish beds.

Where Westport families can find local, fresh, sustainable food at a reasonable cost is of keen

interest to more budget and environmentally conscious households than ever before. Increasingly, residents have been flocking to area farmers markets, selectively patronizing restaurants and shopping at grocery stores featuring locally grown foods, and producing their own food in community or at-home gardens.

The greening of Westport is not only about fruits and vegetables, however. The best satisfaction for discriminating palates also involves eating fresh, local and sustainable seafood. The offshore waters of Westport yield a rich harvest of shellfish that make every seafood connoisseur's mouth water. With state regulations and town commissions maintaining standards for safety and sustainability, a growing abundance of local shellfish are being brought by commercial fishermen to local restaurants, grocery stores and farmers markets.

The best news is that many individuals are discovering that they can also harvest shellfish for themselves, economically and easily. There's no need for a middleman and no need to spend time and effort growing it. The Town of Westport actually cultivates a "garden under the sea" where Connecticut residents can harvest shellfish.

Westport now controls the permitting process for its own publicly accessible shellfish beds. That's because in 2007 former Gov. M. Jodi Rell signed a bill transferring back to the Town of Westport the stewardship of its recreational shellfish beds. Management of 'this garden under the sea' was placed back under the jurisdiction of the Westport Shellfish Commission, which works with local marine enforcement services and area shellfishermen, as well as the Town Health Department and the Connecticut Department of Agriculture/Bureau of Aquaculture, to maximize safe and productive development and usage of the shellfish beds. The best local recreational area is one known as Cockenoe Flats, which lies between the southern boundary of Saugatuck Shores (low water mark) and the northern shore of Cockenoe Island.

When Westporters talk about local shellfish, they mean the two-shell kind. Right in our watery backyard are a variety of shellfish such as Quahog clams, steamers, razor clams, eastern oysters and blue mussels just waiting to be harvested, brought home and served up raw or prepared in some favorite way.

How people partake in this economical, fun and go-green recreational activity is actually fairly simple. They need an inexpensive town permit (for Connecticut residents, prices are \$10 or \$20, depending on the age of the applicant and duration of the permit), knowledge of the rules, some basic equipment, and a spirit of adventure.

"Raking It In" is all about an aqueous treasure hunt. Future articles in this series will discuss where to get a permit, what the rules are, the ecology of the sought-after shellfish, what equipment is needed for harvesting, why this area's cultural and historical heritage is rich with the lore and lure of the oyster, tips and ideas for preparing a locally grown seafood dinner and much more. Next time: a discussion of how to get started, how the permitting process works and what equipment one needs to harvest shellfish from local waters.

Rindy Higgins, a commissioner of a local shellfish commission and trustee of a conservation association in Massachusetts, was a marine educator for more than 20 years at The Maritime Aquarium. Her "Raking It In" series discusses the benefits and challenges, techniques, ecology, and cultural heritage of shellfishing in Westport waters.