

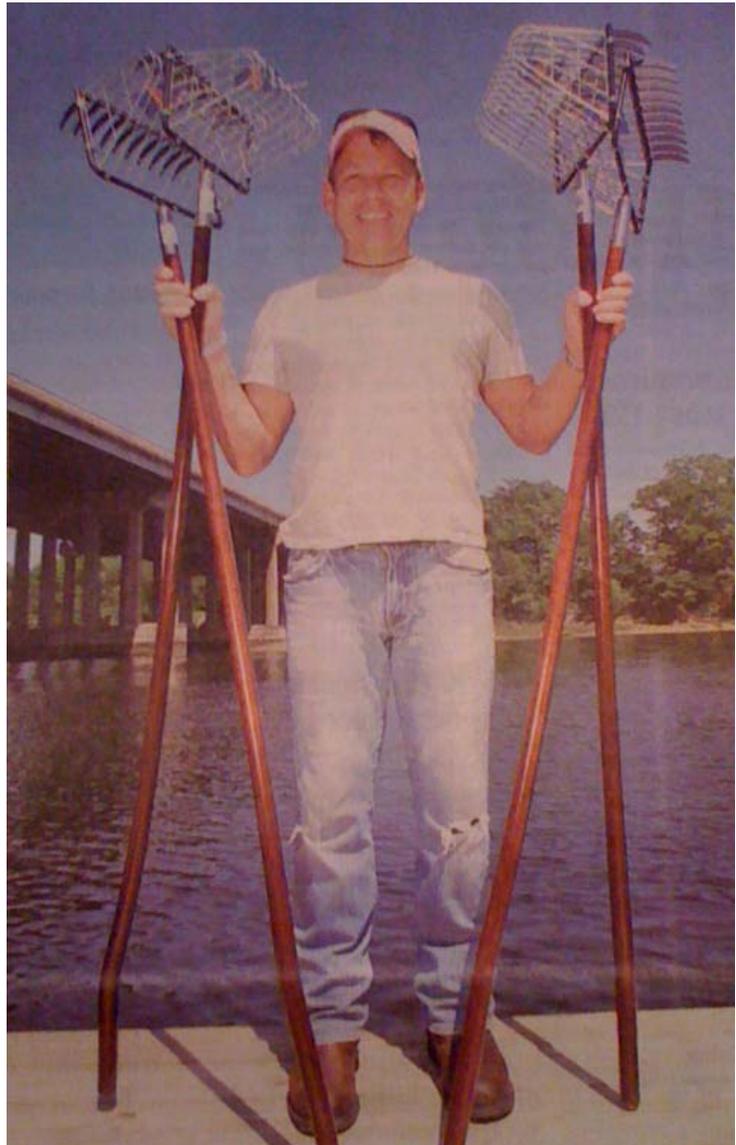
## Digging in

By **RINDY HIGGINS**  
Special to The Hour

Finding food right here in local waters, surrounded by the sights, sounds and smells of the beach, makes shell-fishing an adventurous and wholesome experience. Using the right equipment and technique is directly related to the habitat and behaviors of hard clams, steamers, oysters, and blue mussels.

In our area, the most abundant are Quahogs (pronounced co-hogs) or hard clams, also known as Littlenecks, Topnecks, Cherrystones or Chowder clams, depending on their size. They bury themselves in sand, mud or gravel about three to six inches deep in water still covered at low tide, so looking for a sandy, mud or gravel bottom is important and wading is the way to find them. Most clambers carry a 5-gallon metal or plastic bucket that can be placed on the bottom, when in shallow water. Digging with one's feet, feeling for clams, and then grabbing with

hopeful hands, is the old-fashioned way of harvesting. It usually is a slow, one-at-a-time procedure and, in our area, sometimes produces only an inedible rock. There is an art to feeling the difference between a clam and a rock; rocks move easily, but clams resist as they have a strong muscular foot with which to dig in.



**Eric Johnson, owner of Westport Outfitters, displays clamming rakes outside his store on Wednesday. Clamming in Westport waters has soared after runoff in Norwalk closed the beds there last year.**

*Hour photo / Erik Trautmann*

Even more useful is a wire basket wedged into a flotation ring tied at one's waist and towed along on a six-foot lead line, allowing wading out into the water. A few dollars may be saved by buying a plastic laundry basket or even a string beach bag attached to a floating ring or an inner tube.

Use a rake to dig deeper for harvesting multiple Quahogs. There are several kinds of rakes: the claw style rake available at hardware stores or a basket rake at specialty fishing store, as long as the tines meet the regulations of at least one inch apart.

"Since much of our shellfish beds lie in rocky bottom areas, a claw rake is easier to use," Susan Voris at the Conservation Department advises. "A basket rake is better in the softer areas."

To get started, wade out, aware of any holes or rocks underfoot, until the water is about 12 to 18 inches deep. Dig the tines into the bottom few inches and listen for a "clink" sound or the feel of prongs hitting something hard. Pull the rake towards you and then lift it upwards, scooping up the clams. Drop your catch in the floating basket. Experienced clammers often develop a pattern to their work, standing in one place, placing and pulling the rake inwards and then rotating to one side, repeating over and over again, thus working in a circle. Walk around and try different areas.

While most recreational clammers wade into the water, some may clam from an anchored boat using clam tongs that are useful in about three to 18 feet of water. The advantage is to reach the under-harvested clam beds and perhaps to extend the season when the water gets cold.

Soft-shell clams, sometimes called long-necks or steamer clams, live primarily just under shallow flats exposed at low tide.

Prime times to hunt for steamers are an hour or two around low tide, or around the monthly new and full moon 'spring' tides or the seasonal perigee tides. Whereas gathering hard clams is done by feel and not sight, the search for steamers begins with a visual clue: a small hole. These clams bury into the sand; their long siphons reach to the surface so they can pump water in and out, creating a hole. Other critters, such as worms, can also leave holes, so finding a clam hole is not always so easy. Sometimes there is brown, thread-like clam scat near the hole or a splatter of water where the clam pumped out a few seconds before. A jet of water may squirt up from a clam below, surprising the approaching clammer. These clams are sensitive to vibrations and are quick to dig deeply with their foot appendages. Ready for the challenging ambush, kneel near a hole, dig vigorously about six to twelve inches deep. Scoop sand up and away, and look for the clams in both the hole and the removed sand. Widen the hole to chase clams that may be digging deeper out of grasp. Since the shells are thin and sharp, wear gloves. Pitchforks can also be used, but can break the thin shells of these clams.

Oysters may be easier to see but hard to harvest. Once spotted, usually in tidal marsh areas adjacent to fresh water springs, it is evident they have cemented to each other, or to empty shells, rocks, or to dock pilings. Unlike their relatives, they do not dig out of site nor hold themselves tenaciously underground. A flat head screwdriver or something hard has to be

used to pry or knock them off of the surfaces to which they have adhered to harvest only those of legal size.

Blue mussels, found more along open water areas, slightly above the low tide mark, are easier to find. They grow in tight clusters often clinging to jetties, rocks, even concrete with their byssal threads, or "beards" as they are commonly called.

Once located, the technique, which is a matter of plucking, requires no tools, and produces abundant harvest often without moving and looking further.

The harvested volume and size of particular shellfish are restricted by state statutes and town regulations. To check the size of particular shellfish, one measuring tool for hard clams is a clam ring or gauge; if they are too big to fit through the ring, they can be kept. Another device is simply a small plastic ruler which can be used to measure a variety of shellfish. Hard clams need to be more than 1 inch thick or more than 1.5 inches in diameter. Steamers need to be 1.5 inches long or more, and oysters 3 inches long or more. Harvested mussels must be 2 inches in length or more. These size and volume restrictions allow young shellfish to continue to grow and multiply; this is crucial to sustaining local shellfish. The Town of Westport Recreational Shellfishing Rules and Regulations can be read and/or downloaded from the Town's website. Marine police actively enforce these regulations.

Eric Johnson, owner of Westport Outfitters, is happy to give advice about equipment, technique or where to go. "We have everything here at the store in order to shellfish, but you don't need much, which makes this an economical activity," Johnson says. "We have rakes and flotation rings. We also sell clam rings and gauges. It is important only to take shellfish of a certain size. This allows the stock to sustain itself. "

Shellfishing is a great summer activity and can be quite a workout, using arm and back muscles, so limber up in advance. For many, getting wet is half the fun. Appropriate clothing, as well as protection from mud and water in one's car, should be planned in advance. Bathing suits, shorts, quick dry clothing, old sneakers or water shoes to protect feet, sunscreen, towels and maybe something waterproof to cover the car seat, and a cooler or bucket in which to bring home the wonderful catch of the day should be considered before leaving home. This can be a great family activity; children under age 17 are free when with a permit holder and sharing in the permit holder's daily limit. It gets everyone outdoors, is fun, and the day's harvest can provide a family with an inexpensive and fresh seafood dinner.

Watch for the next article in the Raking It In series: a biological and ecological lesson of local shellfish, how they are the same and different, what conditions are necessary for optimal growth, what puts them at risk, and how the state and the Town of Westport work to preserve and enhance this resource.

*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.*