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Meet The Modern Farmers Creating Public Oyster Gardens

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Bridget Shirvell

South Fork Sea Farmers helps families grow their own oysters and see the importance of sustainable marine aquaculture up close.



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150 families near Long Island will be able to grow their own oysters this summer.

Photography
courtesy South Fork
Sea Farmers

Picture yourself harvesting oysters you grew yourself, sharing them with friends and family. Sound dreamy? It's a reality for more than 100 New York families that, come July, will be shucking their very own shellfish. The participating families get access to grow bags, 1,000 baby oysters, called spat, and 100 fully grown oysters, plus space to farm on a public plot, all courtesy of [South Fork Sea Farmers](#).

The Long Island-based nonprofit organization works to raise awareness of sustainable marine aquaculture through public oyster gardening and other sea farming activities. Oysters are one of the [most environmentally friendly and sustainable protein sources](#). They help filter out pollutants in the water, keep the population of phytoplankton in check and create habitat for other marine life. South Fork Sea Farmers helps the waters off of Long Island reap all those benefits, while connecting people to a food source and teaching them about oyster farming.

"A single oyster filters 50 gallons of water a day," says Jeff Ragovin, a board member

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with the South Fork Sea Farmers. “The oyster gardens are really amazing for the marine environment, providing habitat to shrimp, crabs, sea bass and black fish. While the oysters aren’t for sale, the people growing the oysters get to harvest them for their friends and family.”



Board member Jeff Ragovin.
Photography courtesy of South Fork
Sea Farmers.

Program participants pay a yearly fee of \$200 for the equipment, and, in return, South Fork Sea Farmers asks for 200 oysters back from each plot, allowing it to continue seeding the public gardens. Participants can expect to grow up to 1,000 oysters, ready to eat, over the course of the season.

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“It’s a super-sustainable, good-for-the-earth program,” says Ragovin.

Since it started, the program has grown to five harbors off the coast of Long Island. Last summer, with several partner organizations, it started a new reef in the waters off of Accabonac Harbor. South Fork Sea Farmers had students from East Hampton, NY schools sign up to help build the reefs, using bags of recycled oyster shells upon which spat will settle and grow. Those students will continue to monitor the reef’s progress as part of an educational project.

“We wanted to build a reef for years, but it took time to get the permit and do the shell collection,” says Ragovin. South Fork Sea Farmers purchased biodegradable bags from the Netherlands and filled them with used oyster shells collected from local restaurants to form the foundation of the new reef.

After the shells were collected from restaurants, they had to cure for about six months before they were ready to be placed on the reef. While this reef is built from oyster shells, the waters off New York are also home to several artificial reefs built out of hard structures such as clean, recycled Tappan Zee Bridge material and jetty rock. As those artificial reefs, the first of which was built in the 1940s, tend to collapse over

time, the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, which builds and maintains those reefs, adds materials back to them every few years. The state hopes that, in addition to creating habitats for marine life, the reefs stimulate a productive aquatic ecosystem, increasing marine biodiversity as corals, mussels, snails, crabs and larger fish start to call them home. They also protect the shoreline from flooding and erosion and can decrease the energy of intense storms, and the Accabonac Harbor reef will provide space for more oyster gardening.



Photography courtesy of South Fork Sea Farmers.

South Fork Sea Farmers hopes that, in addition to building more oyster reefs locally, it can help inspire other municipalities and organizations to start their own public oyster gardens.

“We get people all over the country reaching out and asking how they can do something similar, so we’re working on putting together a guide of how to do it,” says Ragovin. “It’s been really a fun and exciting opportunity to see people in the local community be stewards of the environment.

The program has grown to an expected 150 families for the 2023 season, from an initial 15 pilot families, with many families including the original 15 coming back year after year.

If your local town isn’t quite ready for such a program or you don’t live along the coast, you can still witness some of South Fork Sea Farmers’ work when it live streams the oyster spawn next week.

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David Knudson  2 months ago

Wicked cool! Envious! We have farmed
shrimp in Montana, maybe shellfish is next



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