

## Pleasant Bay could raise shellfish gardens, #2-6961

By Rich Eldred/ reldred@cnc.com

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This week, gardeners are clipping rose blossoms, awaiting the first plump tomatoes and keeping the hydrangeas watered. Pleasant Bay Alliance is pondering if Lower Cape residents might be interested in tending gardens of mollusks instead of veggies.

The guest speaker for the Alliance's annual meeting July 20 is Kim Tetreault, director of the Southold Program in Aquaculture Training (known as SPAT) on Long Island. All are welcome.

Five years ago he kick-started a shellfish gardening program that now boasts more than 150 volunteer families propagating their own shellfish, raising them to maturity and not only keeping the stew pots full but replenishing the waters off the north fork of Long Island.

Why not do this in Pleasant Bay?

"I've heard Kim talk several times about his program in Long Island and I've had some volunteers of his go to meetings I've been to, and it struck me as a [good] program for an area that's similar to Cape Cod both environmentally and socially," observed former Orleans Shellfish Warden Sandy Macfarlane. "They do a really good job of focusing the effort on getting shellfish into the water."

Shellfish still grow in Pleasant Bay, and there is commercial shellfish farming in Orleans, but the harvest isn't what it was.

"I want to see if there's any enthusiasm from people around here to get a program like this started. And he's a dynamic speaker," said Macfarlane, who recruited Tetreault to speak in Harwich.

In addition to helping repopulate Pleasant Bay's shellfish beds, shellfish gardening can improve water quality. Nitrogen leaching into the Bay from septic systems and road and lawn runoff is causing the upper bay to become nutrient loaded, leading to algal blooms and low oxygen levels and the loss of Bay bottom life.

"It's about using shellfish as the other prong in estuarine enhancement as we work on wastewater management as the prong on the land side," Macfarlane explained. "Shellfish are filter feeders, they're real cleaner-uppers. They filter out the plankton which are growing from the nutrients in the water and when they're harvested you're removing (nitrogen) from the system. And they are denitrifiers. They transform nitrogen into more benign forms."

### Gardening in the sea

Shellfish gardening is beneficial for the gardeners as well.

"I would say the majority of our gardeners are affluent retirees who did well in life and got waterfront property and want to give something back," Tetreault said. "At any income level, people want to learn new things. Our most dedicated members are in their 60s and 70s and some in their 80s. They're very excited and they have a real purpose with this project."

Growing oysters, quahogs or scallops is an entirely new venture for most volunteer gardeners.

"These people have learned a trade very few people know. They probably run the only community hatchery in the country, the Spat Shack," Tetreault noted. "Any community program has to fit the needs of the community. My talk will be this is what



Terry Chin rakes for quahogs in Pleasant Bay where shellfish gardens could be proposed. (Merrily Lunsford file photo)

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we do. This is how it got going. Here are some things to consider."

One thing Tetreault did was to make the program, run under the auspices of Cornell Cooperative Extension Service, where Tetreault works, as user friendly as possible.

"People can tend these things once every two weeks. On occasion, you might spend more time. But once every two weeks, for a couple of hours and you're good to go," he said. "There is no requirement for anybody to do anything. I might see somebody once a year."

But some volunteers go in whole hog. Tetreault gives three lectures each month for 11 months and gardeners attend as often as they like. In addition, he runs Monday-Wednesday-Friday workshops at the hatchery every week. Volunteers have traveled as far as South Carolina to attend his symposiums.

"Most oyster gardening programs do a one-day workshop and send you on your way," he pointed out. "We're open year-round. We logged 12,000 hours of volunteer time last year. It became a way of life for this group. Some people go to the gym, others go to the marine center and work there."

Their twin hatcheries, where miniature bivalves are raised from birth, is a learning experience par excellence.

"Through the year we have an open door where people can come in and volunteer to help with what we do," he said. "One hatchery is run by Cornell Cooperative Extension, the other one is run by volunteers. They're both on the north fork of Long Island near Greenpoint."

Gardening is strictly non-commercial, as opposed to shellfish farming.

"It's when you get community people to grow shellfish as a hobby," Tetreault explained.

A gardener may get 2,000 oysters, if it's oysters they are growing. When the shellfish are fat and fulsome, half go into Long Island Sound and the rest are the gardener's to poach and season as they please.

"The shellfish we grow are quahogs, bay scallops or Eastern oysters," Tetreault said. "But in a large part our program is education and training."

Hundreds of folks with a thousand oysters apiece leads to some nifty fund-raising parties as well.

"It can be extremely social," Tetreault noted, citing wine tastings and a recent oyster dinner. "But what you're trying to achieve is a higher level of community stewardship. You've gotten a sense of understanding of the environment. If it was drudgery, they wouldn't be so sustained in the program."

People tend their shellfish off their own docks or at the marine center's community garden.

Tetreault believes his gardeners have altered their way of thinking due to the program. They worry about the effect on the oysters of lawn fertilizer or oil from their boats.

"Shellfish farming is the only form of aquaculture on the books as environmentally friendly. They're dependent on the natural water and they are tremendous filter feeders. They're pumping seawater and taking out what they want," Tetreault said. "They're nature's best water filter."

### **Pleasant Bay Alliance annual meeting**

Thursday, July 20, 7 p.m.

Wequassett Inn, Route 28, East Harwich