



LONGBOAT KEY

FRIDAY, JUL. 22, 2022 1 week ago

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Vertical oyster gardens improve local ecosystem and water quality, expert says

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The ecosystem-improvement plan makes use of discarded oyster shells and unused space below docks.

by: [Lauren Tronstad](#) | Staff Writer

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seafood restaurants are likely now strung together as part of a vertical oyster garden designed to help improve Sarasota Bay water quality.



and develop.

“There’s a lot of interest in creating artificial reefs under docks because it's an unused space,” said Shaun Swartz, an environmental specialist at Manatee County's Natural Resources department. “These are an alternative to some of the ones that are plastic-based and don’t last as long.”

The new initiative was created in order to improve the area’s marine ecosystems.



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“Clams and oysters filter water through just by living in the waterway,” he said. “They’re filter feeders. They can remove nutrients from the water and increas





Oysters can filter up to 50 gallons of water a day, which can aid in the growing concern of locals regarding the future of the area’s water quality, Swartz said.

“(Oysters) are the superheroes of this ecosystem,” Swartz said while participating in a Longboat Key “Talk of the Town” segment.

In the segment with Town Manager Tom Harmer, he illustrated the importance and benefits of the oyster shells in hopes of increasing community awareness of the program and encouraging participation.

Manatee County and the town of Longboat Key have partnered with Tampa Bay Estuary Program, Sarasota Estuary Program and Solutions To Avoid Red Tide as they begin dispersing the oyster gardens to residents with docks as part



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ent initiative to improve local ecosystems.

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The shells that are part of the gardens are quarantined for about six months before being strung up with other shells, allowing for the removal of harmful bacteria and foodborne illness that the shells might have been exposed to after being prepared and consumed at the restaurants.

“It’s basically taking what would otherwise be trash at our landfill and creating something out of it,” Swartz said.

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SHELLS.

The oyster shells are strung together by volunteers who drill small holes in the shells before stringing the twine, which has stainless steel wire in its middle,





Shaun Swartz, environmental specialist, shows where a small hole has been drilled into an oyster shell. (Photo by Lauren Tronstad)

hold under the dock.

Swartz also takes piles of shells to local schools for the students to string up the oysters and learn about oysters and shellfish restoration.

Community participation

Residents of the county and surrounding areas have the opportunity to pick up their own pre-made vertical oyster gardens for free at a drop box at the

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At the moment, the preserve drop box is the only location locals can pick up their vertical oyster gardens, but Swartz and the department are looking into ways to expand for easier access for the rest of the county.

The drop box can only store between 10 and 15 vertical oyster gardens at once. However, interest in upwards of 200 oyster gardens has been brought to Swartz, who has helped coordinate getting the shells to the homes.

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using a QR code on the sign by the box to receive the code needed to open the lock.



gather data about the oyster gardens and their progress through pictures and questions answered by participants.



A pile of unused oyster shells await a group of volunteers before being strung into a vertical oyster garden. (Photo by Lauren Tronstad)

Word-of-mouth and easy accessibility to the free product has aided in public interest in the initiative. Swartz cited that he has yet to come across someone that was opposed to the idea.

While this initiative is newer, the concept is not new to Swartz or the department. Vertical oyster

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have been deployed before with some under fishing docks at the
re for over a year.

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“(The program) engages the community, gets them involved and then raises awareness about oyster restoration on a larger scale,” he said.

Growing oysters

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Within six weeks, it is typical to see barnacles, marine worms and crabs staying on the shells. The juvenile oyster growth takes longer.





Shaun Swartz, environmental specialist, points out crabs and worms on a vertical oyster garden at Robinson Preserve. (Photo by Lauren Tronstad)

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... you have a space for little slimy creatures like crabs and worms at the fish to live, it attracts other things in the food web,” Swartz said. ... creating prey and space for that prey, so that larger fish can come in and eat. It’s supporting larger wildlife in the area.”

The project is estimated to continue for the long-term with hopes of continuous community support to ensure optimal success.

“This community-based approach is pretty unique, especially a local ... ”

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this.

One of the most recent deployments of the oyster gardens was at Longboat Key’s Joan Durante Park. Swartz tied 50 strings of oyster shells to the bottom





“It is unlikely you will see any growth on those yet as they have only been under there a couple of weeks,” he said.

Although the shells need to remain underwater at all times, some of the oyster gardens will be easily viewable by the public.

Where to Pick Up Vertical Oyster Gardens

Robinson Preserve NEST, 840 99th St. NW, Bradenton

Individuals must first fill out a survey, which can be done using the QR code on the sign by the box or ahead of time. The survey asks where den is planned to be and how many are to be taken.

After filling out the survey, a code will be provided for the lock on the box.

The proposed solution for improved water quality and ecosystem sustainability was chosen for its durability and lasting impacts on the ecosystem.

“Once they’re set up they are virtually maintenance-free,” Swartz said. “I always go back and check on them just to make sure they’re doing OK and to monitor growth and establishment. They’re really easy to get involved with and they don’t require a lot of maintenance.”



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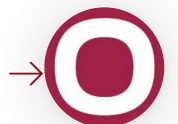


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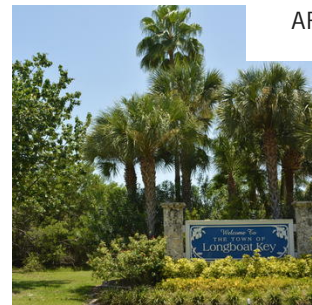
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Construction is planned for completion in the fall with the remaining work to be wrapped up by the end of the year, a year earlier than initially



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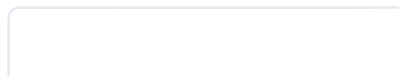
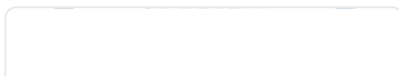
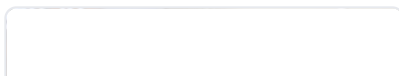
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