

Vertical oyster gardens grow habitats and communities

Vertical oyster gardens are being deployed across Longboat Key to improve the water quality in Sarasota Bay.

By [Lesley Dwyer](#) | 5:00 a.m. February 14, 2023



An updated view of the 50 vertical oyster gardens hung under the observation deck at Joan Durante Park. Even from a distance, the growth is easily visible.

Photo by Lesley Dwyer

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Jan. 28 was the kind of Saturday morning made for sleeping in: cold and windy. Still, half the neighborhood and four town commissioners and commissioner-elects hunkered down on Buttonwood Drive to string four giant buckets' worth of oyster shells in the name of cleaning up Sarasota Bay.

Town Commissioner BJ Bishop lives in Buttonwood Harbour and suggested the program as a neighborhood project.

“In the meantime, we’ve had a boat basin beautification project here. We laid in new electrical, new water so that people didn’t have to be running hoses along here, laid out all these new pavers,” event organizer Carol Erker said.

“So we thought here’s a good opportunity when our snowbirds are back, let’s have a vertical oyster garden event outside and showcase our newly refurbished boat basin.”

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Oyster shells waiting to be strung and turned into vertical oyster gardens.

Photo by Lesley Dwyer

The Sarasota Bay Estuary Program's public outreach manager and assistant, Megan Barry and Christine Quigley, gave a presentation, the gardens were strung, and a buffet of sandwiches and sweets awaited the volunteers.

The vertical oyster gardens are part of an effort to use oyster shells from restaurants to create habitats for filter-feeding organisms that cleanse water in the bay.



The once-pristine oyster shells are now a habitat for marine filter feeders. Barnacles are the easiest to spot.

The morning was an everyday example of the common camaraderie among so many Longboat Key communities and town commissioners. First, do good. Then, throw a little party to catch up with the neighbors.

Also, spread the word. These won't be the last vertical oyster gardens being hung in Buttonwood Harbour.

"Some of the homes are right on the canal and about a dozen of those folks have expressed an interest in hanging vertical oyster gardens from their docks as well," Erker said. "We have five docks here in the harbor, so our



association is committed to putting vertical oyster gardens hanging from each of these.”

Fast forward six months

The Observer first reported on vertical oyster gardens in [July 2022](#). At the time, 50 gardens had been strung underneath the new observation deck at Joan Durante Park.



The vertical oyster beds are easily seen when walking out to the observation deck at Joan Durante Park.

Photo by Lesley Dwyer

Six months later, the gardens are delivering as advertised. Once pristine oyster shells that were bleached and disinfected under the sun for six months are now covered in barnacles and shades of black, brown, gray and green.

They don't look nearly as pretty, but it's exactly what the Estuary Program is looking to see. Volunteer Tim Thurman checked on the gardens and sent a report and pictures to Barry.

“They have a lot of growth on them. So far, they've been durable,” Barry said. “It really shows the perfect environment for the oysters. You can see a lot of colonization. You can see different marine filter feeders on them.”

Marine filter feeders are important because they constantly take in and excrete water. That process is filtering the bay, and vertical oyster gardens attract them because the feeders like to attach to things.

Seeing growth is important for data purposes. Residents who deploy gardens are asked to report back with their sightings. Impact metrics are still being worked out because it's a newer program.

“It's a little more difficult to directly measure the water quality impact. We know that there's a habitat value,” Barry said. “We've had people report that they've seen all the filter feeders, shrimp and fish, so we know that there is a qualitative benefit here.”





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Lesley Dwyer is the community reporter for Longboat Key and a graduate of the University of South Florida. After earning a bachelor's degree in professional and technical writing, she freelanced for the Sarasota Herald-Tribune. Lesley has lived in the Sarasota area for over 25 years.

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