

By: P.J. Waters, Aquaculture Extension Assistant
Alabama Sea Grant/Auburn Marine Center

Have you heard of the Oyster Gardening Program? Perhaps you have or, maybe you have seen your neighbors caring for cages of oysters through the summer. Volunteers and school groups from around Mobile Bay have been doing just that for a number of years now.

How does it work? This program, is dependent on gardeners who receive hatchery-reared juvenile oysters ('Spat') set on whole shell from the Auburn University Shellfish Laboratory. These oyster spat are placed in cages ('Page Cage') at the beginning of the summer and are hung from volunteer's piers in the middle of the water column. They are held this way to provide them ample water flow through the cage so the little oysters get the food they need, while being protected from predators such as blue crabs and oyster drills. Volunteers care for these oysters by hosing them off and removing any predators from the cages each week.

Periodically, personnel from Auburn University Marine Extension and Research Center (AUMERC) come around to check in on the oysters, and they are always a phone call or an e mail away if volunteers have questions. At the end of the summer, the oysters have grown considerably (usually 2-3 inches), and it is time for them to be relocated to various restoration reefs within Mobile Bay. At this point, Mobile Bay Oyster Gardening personnel come back to the gardening sites and collect the oysters to take them to these

reefs. The idea being now that they are larger, they will have a better chance of survival in the wild where they will continue to filter food and play their important role in our ecosystem.

Sound like something you want to be involved with? There are a few conditions that need to be met to be a gardener including access to water (a pier) and a location that is considered “open” to shellfish harvesting. There are workshops for citizens interested in becoming involved with the program planned for Saturday, April 17th and Saturday, May 1st at 10:00 AM. Presentations on the Oyster Gardening Program will be made, and any questions you may have will be answered. For more information, or to register for one of the workshops, contact me (251.438.5690) or go online to www.mobilebayoystergarden.org . We look forward to seeing you there.

For additional questions or information, contact P.J. Waters, Auburn University Marine Extension and Research Center, 438-5690.