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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 from around Mobile Bay have been doing just that for a number of years now. They have been, and continue to participate in the Oyster Gardening Program run by the Mobile Bay National Estuary Program and supported by the Auburn University Shellfish Laboratory and Auburn University Marine Extension and Research Center.

How does it work? This program, though managed by the MBNEP/AUSL/AUMERC, is dependent on volunteers who receive juvenile oysters ('Spat') set on whole shell from AUSL. 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 monitoring their growth, and hosing them off every once and a while.

Periodically, personnel from MBNEP and 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, and it is time for them to be relocated to various restoration reefs within Mobile Bay. At this point,

MBNEP/AUSL/ and AUMERC personnel come back to the volunteers and collect the oysters to take them to these reefs. The idea being that now 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 volunteer including access to water (generally a pier) and a location that is considered “open” to shellfish harvesting. There is a workshop and information session for citizens interested in becoming involved with the program planned for Saturday, May 19th at 10:00 AM in Gulf Shores. The workshop will be held at the Claude Peteet Mariculture Center in the Alabama Marine Resources Division (AMRD) office. Presentations on the oyster’s role in the ecosystem and the Oyster Gardening Program will be made, and any questions you may have will be answered. If you have questions or need directions, please feel free to contact me (information follows the article) or Kara Lankford (MBNEP) at 251.431.6409. 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.