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Seafood is a part of life in south Alabama. Of the multitude of choices we have, oysters are a particular favorite. No matter how you cook them (or not) they appear in all kinds of popular dishes here along the gulf coast. The oyster also plays an important role in the ecosystem of Mobile Bay. Its reefs provide habitats for more than 300 other species, it helps reduce erosion, and it filters the water. An adult oyster can filter up to five gallons of water each hour. Quite a workhorse for something that tastes so good.

Since 2001 your neighbors around Mobile Bay have been volunteering with the Mobile Bay National Estuary Program, the Auburn University Marine Extension and Research Center, and the Auburn University Shellfish Laboratory in a cooperative program that has come to be known as Oyster Gardening. Every year about this time AUSL researchers set juvenile oysters (spat) on whole shells. After a few weeks of growing, MBNEP and AUMERC outreach personnel take the baby oysters to volunteers who care for them through the summer and into the fall. The oysters are held in small mesh cages (Page Cage) and suspended from piers.

By keeping them in the cage and off the bottom, the volunteers help protect the growing oysters from several predators. Periodically the MBNEP or AUMERC personnel will come by to check on them, but the volunteers can always call or e mail if they have any questions. After several months of growing, the oysters are collected from the volunteers

and stocked on a restoration reef in Mobile Bay. These older oysters have a higher survival chance as a result of the care provided by the volunteers.

Sound like something you want to be involved with? There is a workshop this Saturday May 19<sup>th</sup> at 10:00 AM. The workshop will be held at the Alabama Marine Resources Division office in Gulf Shores located at Claude Peteet Mariculture Center. 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. 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.