

Growing Oysters Under Piers for Personal Consumption

► Learn how to legally, sustainably, and safely grow your own oysters under your pier.

In Alabama there has been a renewal of our love affair with oysters. Commercial oyster farmers are raising crops of world-class oysters in areas of open water. In doing so they are providing oysters as well as jobs to some of the region's finest restaurants. Participation in Alabama's Oyster Gardening Program is booming where volunteers contribute their time to help raise oysters under their piers each summer to help restore natural oyster reefs.

As these activities have grown, so has interest among landowners with water access to raise oysters for personal consumption. Here you'll learn what it takes to legally and sustainably grow oysters underneath private piers for personal consumption.

Categories of Oyster Farming

There are currently three categories of oyster culture in Alabama: commercial (including under piers), oyster gardening, and personal consumption. Commercial oyster culture entails production of oysters with the intent to sell, trade, or barter. For more information, visit www.alaquaculture.com. Oyster gardening is the nonconsumptive culture of oysters for habitat enhancement or ecological benefit. Oysters grown for personal consumption are strictly for the benefit of the individual grower.

Each category carries specific production and regulatory requirements related to oyster culture and harvest. It is important for you to know what these are prior to beginning any oyster production.

Growing Oysters for Personal Consumption

Following are questions that many private growers have about raising oysters at their piers.

May I grow oysters at my location?

Oysters, which are commonly eaten raw and whole, are very efficient at filtering water, food particles, and many other items, including bacteria. Eating oysters with high concentrations of bacteria may cause people to become ill and, in some cases, die.



In commercial operations, this risk is managed by allowing the harvest of oysters only from waters that the Alabama Department of Public Health (ADPH) has classified as "conditionally approved" through a nationally recognized sampling process. While this is not required for personal consumption, it is strongly recommended that people follow this guideline and grow oysters for personal consumption only in waters that are conditionally approved and open for harvest (e.g., not closed by ADPH due to high rainfall).

Consumers also should be aware of the risks associated with eating raw oysters, even when harvested from open, conditionally approved waters. There are naturally occurring bacteria called vibrios that may cause illness and even death, particularly for immune-compromised individuals. This risk is managed by ensuring that harvested oysters are chilled and kept cold within specific time frames to prevent the vibrios from multiplying and increasing the risk. It is strongly recommended that anyone harvesting oysters for personal consumption be aware of the risk and follow the requirements used for commercial harvest.

Before you begin to raise oysters for personal consumption, you should contact the ADPH to confirm the status of the growing waters where you are located. Additionally, become familiar with the time and temperature requirements for commercial harvest of oysters for live, raw consumption.

How can I grow oysters?

Oysters can be grown in floating bags, suspended cages, or on the bed of the water. For floating and suspended culture, you can use structures permitted by the US Army Corps of Engineers (USACE). If the structure is a pier or dock, cages can be suspended from pilings.

Only the area within the footprint of the pier may be used for growing oysters. If you want to grow oysters outside the footprint of a pier, you must first contact the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources Marine Resources Division.

Within the footprint of the permitted pier, an individual may do the following: plant oyster shells (with or without preset juvenile oysters, also referred to as spat) on the bottom; suspend or float shells (with or without preset spat); and suspend or float single oysters. Any other material may not be used unless it receives approval from USACE.

Floating gear is allowed if the gear remains under the pier. You may not tie floating gear to a pier in a manner that allows it to obstruct or alter navigable waters. Further, you may not tie any type of gear between two neighboring piers or pilings. Before using a structure that you do not own, you must obtain the explicit permission from the structure's owner.

If you grow oysters inside the existing footprint of a pier or utilize gear tethered under an existing pier, you assume all liability from damages due to the structure or gear. This includes, but is not limited to, the maintenance of the gear or gear migration to locations beyond the pier's footprint.

Where can I get seed oysters?

As a private oyster grower, you are required to follow regulations regarding sourcing of oyster seed and spat on shells. There currently are significant restrictions on where and how you may obtain oyster seed (oysters less than 1 inch in length). The restrictions are designed to ensure that non-native species (e.g., pathogens, pests)

do not become established in local waters and to protect the genetic integrity of our native oyster populations. Approved hatcheries that supply oyster seed in Alabama may be found by visiting www.alaquaculture.com for more information.

Why are there so many rules?

There are two reasons why you may not simply grow oysters under your pier without following the rules even for personal consumption. First, you are raising oysters in public waters, and the rules are designed to ensure that our natural resources are protected and that other citizens can enjoy their rights associated with the public resource. Second, there are significant human health risks to eating raw oysters. The rules pertaining to where oysters can be raised, when they can be harvested, and to whom they are sold to ensure that the people who eat your oysters do not get sick.

A robust system for tracking oysters and monitoring water quality instills confidence among consumers and ensures market prices are stable. For more information, visit the Food and Drug Administration's website at www.fda.gov/food/resources-you-food/consumers.

Contact Information

Alabama Department of Public Health: Byron Webb,
byron.webb@adph.state.al.us 251-433-2428

Alabama Department of Marine Resources: Jason Herrmann, jason.herrmann@dcnr.alabama.gov 251-861-2882

Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources: Jeremiah Kolb, Jeremiah.kolb@dcnr.alabama.gov 251-621-1909

Auburn University Shellfish Lab: Rusty Grice, rtg0010@auburn.edu

Oyster Gardening Program of Alabama: P J Waters, waterph@auburn.edu



William Walton, *Extension Specialist*, Associate Professor; **Phillip Waters**, *Extension Specialist*; and **Russell Grice**, *Administrator, Outreach Programs*, Fisheries, Aquaculture, and Aquatic Science, all with Auburn University

For more information, contact your county Extension office. Visit www.aces.edu/directory.

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