

Of seaweeds & seashores: exploring health benefits

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By Christine Hopkins

Living on our beautiful Island - we are, of course, keenly aware of our rich seaweed garden...or are we? Some of us are - and we treasure it like gold.

As an avid gardener arriving here in 1994, I was immediately knee-deep in composting seaweeds to mulch my new garden beds - optimistically filled with vivid rhodos and roses and so many other 'exotics'. I was so excited to be able to grow the rich variety of edible, aromatic herbs, and ornamental plants with this rich, organic 'compost'. Only just beginning to realize the phenomenal wealth of nutrients, trace minerals, and essential amino acids contained; I started down the winding path...

The path from rich garden resource - to therapeutic baths and treatments - to gourmet food...and now to 'Food Security' ...has been a fascinating journey. My passion for herbs and aromatic plants lead me into Aromatherapy in the mid-nineties. I was exceptionally lucky to do my first International Certification in 1998 with Valerie Gennari Cooksley. Coming from a medical background (RN specializing in Oncology - cancer care) Valerie is an esteemed educator and author of 6 published books, the first five on Aromatherapy and her latest is Seaweed: Nature's Secret to Balancing Your Metabolism, Fighting Disease, and Revitalizing Body & Soul.

Valerie was the first person to introduce the concept of using seaweed therapeutically for nutrition, skin and health care and disease prevention. She remained my long-term mentor and we met several times during the 5 years she was researching for the Seaweed book. Her excitement with her expanding knowledge base was infectious, leading me to seek more education on this fascinating subject. Valerie supplied me with books and resources - but finding good sources of education at that time was challenging.

I soon learned there were local pioneers... like Frederique and Sinclair Phillips, co-owners of Sooke Harbour House. Frederique & Sinclair set the standard, with Edward Tuson, their chef at the time, utilizing the vast resources surrounding their seashore and beautiful gardens - winning awards for their amazing culinary creations to this day! Diane Bernard, owner of Outer Coast Seaweeds, has taken the Spa Industry by 'storm' -- introducing her fresh natural seaweed products to an international market hungry for natural products. In my own community, I discovered my closest neighbour, Amanda Swinimer, Marine Biologist (and mermaid!), who dives to harvest the 'big browns' (Alaria and Bull Kelp) to sell dried and packaged for her business, Dakini Tidal Wilds!

I recently coordinated a Seaweed Workshop and Retreat held in early June at Ocean Wilderness Inn on the West Coast Road. Our facilitator was Vera Ronnigen from Hornby Island, another local pioneer motivated by her deep concern over the loss of the Bull Kelp and Alaria beds near Hornby, to seek further education on this critical resource.

She returned to her native Norway to achieve a Master of Science in Marine Ecology. Vera helped our wonderful group of enthusiastic participants to understand the enormous nutritional and therapeutic properties of our incredibly diverse species of local seaweeds.

Learning the extensive therapeutic and nutritional properties of seaweeds and studying the newest research on anti-cancer properties (and how remarkably beneficial they are for a multitude of other health concerns and diseases) is very encouraging at a time when we are clearly experiencing a cancer epidemic and general health care crisis. Educating people about the health benefits and healing properties becomes a priority...especially making sure people are aware of the critical need to protect this valuable resource.

Recently my neighbour Amanda and I have been able to collaborate doing workshops, teaching people some identification and sustainable harvesting, as well as drying, cooking, body care and gardening. We share a sense of urgency about preserving the integrity of our marine environment, which has inspired us to be more involved in educational opportunities - believing that people will be more committed to protecting a resource, which they understand and value.

And back to the garden...

Inspired by some wonderful conversations with 'Master Gardener' and author, Carolyn Herriot, who attended our Seaweed Retreat... I am back in my 'land garden' as well as my 'sea garden'. Carolyn is very focused on 'Food Security and Sustainability' and we agreed that our wonderful assortment of edible seaweeds, added to the bounty from growing numbers of prolific backyard and community gardens, begins to give us a much more optimistic picture of being truly self-sufficient. (Carolyn's newest book, *The Zero-Mile Diet: A year round guide to growing Organic Food*, has just been released and has shot right up the BC Bestsellers list!)

One caveat - seaweeds are exceptionally efficient at absorbing toxins - in our bodies and in their own ecological environment - hence the necessity of ensuring that any used for food and skin-care, must come from a 'clean' habitat. This means the water must not be polluted by industrial waste, run-off from storm drains, septic and sewer, etc.

We are all "united by water" - particularly our oceans - yet we forget how critical they are to our survival.

Days spent learning about seaweeds on the beach ...or growing healthy organic food... are good for the spirit as well as the body and the mind. These are things we can do for ourselves and our planet which are truly valuable and encouraging. It is very satisfying to be 'out in the garden' again - planting and watching over young plants (Of course, I am draping seaweeds all around to nourish and to protect them from slugs and other 'predators'.). We are so very

fortunate in our rich Island habitat...!

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[From the Garden...at French Beach](#)

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