

### **Oyster Gardener Interview**

My Papa, my dad's dad Al Wajciechowski, is an oyster farmer on the York River, so I thought I'd focus my conservation report on the importance of oysters. Here are the questions I asked my Papa and the answers I received: (My questions are in blue.)

**When did you start oyster farming?** He started when I was born, about 12 years ago, in 2010.

**What made you choose to be an oyster farmer?** He enjoys eating oysters and he is very adamant in keeping the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries clean and pristine. He told me that oysters are a filter feeder and each oyster filters about 50 gallons of water per day. They take in surrounding water, get rid of the bad nutrients and then put out clean water.

**Where do you get your oysters?** He belongs to TOGA, Tidewater Oyster Gardeners Association and he is currently a master oyster gardener. He goes to oyster exhibitions at least once a year and has taken a lot of classes to learn about oysters and farming them. Vendors that grow oyster spat (the baby oysters) are there selling oysters. He bought 1,000 Triploid oysters about a month ago and they all fit in his hands in a mesh bag. It takes 2-3 years to have an adult oyster. Diploids are one type of oyster that when it releases its larve, it will attach to something else and will grow into another oyster. Triploids are a type of oyster that are genetically altered oyster seeds that don't reproduce but they grow faster.

**Can you make a lot of money from oysters?** He doesn't sell them, but he gives them to friends and family. Some people that have huge areas of oysters do make a lot of money. He has about 3,000 oysters in different sizes right now in his special oyster floats off his pier.

**How many oysters have you harvested?** Over 12 years, probably 20,000. It sounds like a lot, but after you spread it over the years, it isn't so many. They have oyster beds from commercial fishermen right out from their house and they scrape the bottom of the river for oysters.

**How much work is it to be an oyster farmer?** You can't just let them sit. You need to keep your oyster cages clean so they will be able to keep the oysters clean. One time, we saw an otter sitting on top of the oyster cage sneaking his oysters for lunch.

**What else can you tell me about oysters?** Oysters grow in water temperature up to 35 degrees Fahrenheit. Once it gets below 35 degrees, they go dormant and stop growing. For this area, dormant season is usually in the middle of December through mid-March. It's best to eat raw oysters in the winter months that end in "R" because there is less disease. There was a big disease problem in oysters, and scientists are still trying to remedy that. In the 1800's there were oysters everywhere. Now, the Chesapeake Bay has about 1% of what they had then. The problem was too many people harvesting them and disease has killed a lot of them.

Also, I also read an article from Colonial Williamsburg's Journal by Gil Klein from Autumn 2015 and I learned some interesting things:

- Native Americans had used large amounts of oyster shells before European settlers arrived.
- Cpt. John Smith wrote that oysters were "thick as stones" as he explored the Bay and its rivers.

- In the early 18th century, students at the College of William & Mary must have eaten oysters because thousands of shells were thrown into a sawpit near the Wren Building. This was discovered during excavation.
- Oysters in salty water are attacked by parasites that make large holes into their shells. Oysters shells in brackish water have smaller holes while oysters living in fresher water have no holes.
- Oysters were used as food and lime for building materials, such as concrete and mortar. Oyster shells were used to build the original town in Williamsburg.

I've eaten fried oysters before and they aren't too bad. I've never tried one raw and I don't think I want to. Oysters are pretty amazing and we have to help them continue to save the Bay!