

# **TIDEWATER OYSTER GARDENERS ASSOCIATION HISTORY**

**by Jackie Partin, TOGA Founder**

My husband, John, and I moved to Gloucester in February of 1996. In March or April, the Gloucester Mathews Gazette Journal had an article about a meeting of people interested in oyster gardening. The meeting was held in a church in Kilmarnock, and the speaker was Don Beard. Don was an early volunteer with the Virginia Institute of Marine Science, in a trial to see if oysters could be successfully grown in floats at people's docks or piers. Don had amassed a mailing list of quite a few people who were trying it or wanted to.

We decided, as recent retirees and new residents of Virginia, that we would like to try this on our creek, Ferry Creek, off the Piankatank. Don was kind enough to measure our salinity, and found it high enough to sustain oyster growth. As I became more interested in learning about this, I discovered other people in our community who were also interested.

Leslie Bowie was at that time working as coordinator for the Piankatank River Watershed Project. This project worked hand-in-hand with Save the Old Piankatank, which focused primarily on the annual river clean-up. Lyn Layer was a member of this group.

The Watershed Project identified oyster gardening as a way to get citizens involved and to clean up the river. With Jim Wesson's help, Leslie organized the first float building workshop. Jim is the person in charge of oyster restoration for the Virginia Marine Resource Commission. The response to the Workshop was so overwhelming that they knew they were on to something. But after the workshop was over, it became obvious that people needed a source for supplies, information and help starting and maintaining their gardens. Don Beard had been urging me to start an organization similar to the Northern Neck Oyster Gardeners on the Middle Peninsula. So Leslie, Lyn and I sat down at my kitchen table and we founded the organization that became TOGA.

In 1997, TOGA became a 501©3 Not-For-Profit organization.

The Virginia Institute of Marine Science (VIMS) was very interested in oyster gardening, and approached a number of people up and down the Virginia coast to test the idea. Dr. Armisted Williams was the first to undertake oyster gardening in Virginia, placing bags of oysters into the water underneath his dock in Ware Neck. Dr. Williams was a longtime member of TOGA and the organization made a donation to the VIMS library in his name after his death.

VIMS policy was to advise gardeners to begin their oyster gardening in the fall, in order to miss the summer proliferation of oyster parasites and the likelihood that spring-planted oyster spat would become infected and die earlier. Therefore, we planned workshops in September, where we taught people to build their own Taylor floats. They then could purchase bags and other equipment needed from a vendor, Peter Perina of Eastfields Farms, and spat from Ken Kurkowski, of Middle Peninsula Aquaculture. Ken had the only local commercial hatchery at that time. We gave a short class on how to grow oysters and how to care for them, and the gardeners took their spat home and got them into the water

off their dock. Both Peter and Ken were involved in early meetings of those of us organizing TOGA, and were valuable in the planning. Also involved in these planning meetings was Gerald Hopkins, of Seaford.

Don Beard and the Northern Neck Oyster Gardeners also had Float Workshops, at Reedville, which included a talk by Jim Wesson on the state of oysters in the Chesapeake Bay, and a talk by Don Beard on how to grow oysters. This workshop was also in September.

An early problem developed when large numbers of people heard about oyster gardening in the winter or spring, and wanted immediate information on how to get an early start in gardening. Thus was born the Spring Oyster Fairs. The first Oyster Fair was on May 9, 1998, at Christchurch School in Saluda. Vendors with bags and pre-made floats attended, and sometimes Ken Kurkowski had spat, which he had held over from the fall spawns, for sale. Since the Fairs were held in April or May, it was too early for oysters in the hatcheries to spawn, since they require a warmer water temperature. A few years later, a second Oyster Fair was held in the Northern Neck, due to the great interest there in oyster gardening and the need for information about gardening.

Faculty and staff of VIMS wanted to increase the number of gardeners, but also hoped that our organization would take some of the burden of phone calls from people wanting to grow oysters. In 1997, Leslie, Lyn and I met with some of the Administration, Faculty and Staff. Leslie and I were Master Gardeners and Leslie had come up with the idea that we could, with VIMS help, start a Master Oyster Gardeners Course, which would be limited to a few very interested individuals who were willing to volunteer their time to help other gardeners. At this point, dealing with TOGA was turned over to Mike Oesterling, in Fisheries and Aquaculture at VIMS. Mike had a young lady named Laura Rose working with him, and he made her the TOGA liaison and in charge of developing the Master Oyster Gardeners Course.

The first Master Oyster Gardeners Course was held July 8-11, 1998. It was a three-and-a-half-day course held at the VIMS campus. There were 20 graduates of that class. There have now been nine MOG courses, with the next to be held in the summer of 2015. The Course covers Oyster Biology, Oyster Diseases, Oyster Genetics and Non-Native Species, Shellfish Hatchery Technology, Permitting, and Health Department concerns. For the attendees, the Course was a huge success.

Our VIMS connection, Laura Rose, left VIMS soon after that event, and Mike Oesterling then became the VIMS liaison for TOGA, and remained so until 2011, when he retired. Under Mike's leadership, the Master Oyster Gardeners Courses continued, eventually becoming every other year rather than every year. We also developed a number of posters and a brochure to give to people who wanted to learn to grow oysters. MOGs worked with people, sometimes going to their growing sites to help with specific site questions. TOGA volunteers began to go to community events and talked about growing oysters and provided educational materials about oysters and oyster gardening.

In 1999, TOGA applied for a grant to the Chesapeake Bay Restoration Fund. This grant was to map oyster gardens in the Chesapeake Bay. Volunteers used their boats to survey rivers and creeks for oyster floats, and recorded the locations with Global Positioning Systems. Salinity was also measured at each site. An additional part of the grant was to purchase varying strains of spat in September and measure

their sizes then and again in May, to help determine successful strains for the locations tested.

The first TOGA newsletter was published in the spring of 2000, and since then, there have been three newsletters a year, mailed to TOGA members, advising them of the Spring Fairs, the September Float Workshop and the Winter Annual Meeting, first held in December then moved to January.

