

Clam Gardens

One of the food sources that helped coastal First Nations survive in the past was the clam. If you go to an ancient village site along the British Columbia coast, you will find it is built on deep layers of white shells from clams and other shellfish, like cockles and mussels.

Clams are very nutritious. They are rich in protein, and also nutrients such as iron, Vitamin C and Vitamin D.

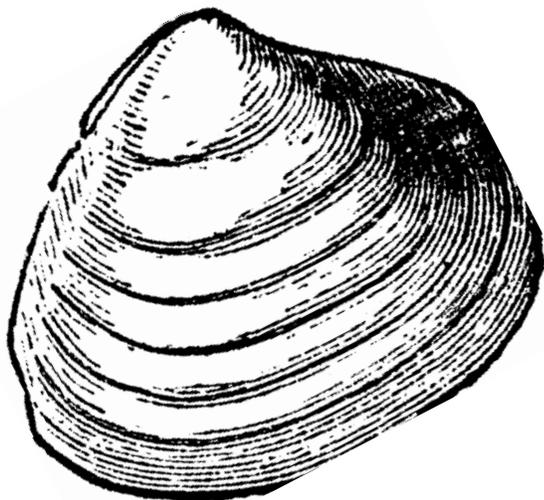
There are four main species of clams along the BC coast: butter clam, littleneck, horse clam, and cockles.

Harvesting clams

Clams and cockles are easy to harvest by all members of the family. They live below the surface of beaches in the intertidal zone. They sometimes give themselves away by squirting water through holes.

In the past, clams and cockles were a dependable food source. People could almost always find a good feed of shellfish, summer or winter.

The best time of year to gather clams is in the winter. In warmer months people knew that they might not be safe to eat. They could be polluted by what we call “red tide.”



As well as observing the water to see a change in colour, people would watch the animals like seagulls and otters. If they were eating the clams, then people knew they were safe to dig.

Preserving clams

First Nations families harvested large amounts of clams in the past. Some were eaten fresh, but most were preserved to be eaten later.

The shellfish were steamed open and the meat was threaded onto sticks to be roasted or smoked over a fire. Some people put them between mats and stomped on them to make them more tender.

The dried clams could be stored for a long time, or they could be traded with other First Nations.

The clams made a good snack. Sometimes people strung them on strings which they wore around their neck. If they got hungry while going about their work, they could pull off a clam to eat.

Clam gardens

We know clams were an important food source in the past because First Peoples built large clam gardens to improve the quality and quantity of the clams.

To do this, people long ago built walls along a sloping beach, and filled it in with sand to make level ground.

All along the Pacific coast, First Nations people built thousands of these beach terraces. In one bay alone on Quadra Island there are at least 49 separate gardens.

It took a great deal of knowledge to build and maintain these gardens. First, the builders had to understand the currents and tides to know the best places to build them.

The clam gardeners must have had a detailed understanding of the intertidal ecosystem to create such successful technology to manage their shellfish harvest.

The walls were as much as two meters high. They were created by rolling boulders down to the lowest of the low tide levels.

The rock walls were built at just the right height so the sandy terrace behind it would create the best growing habitat for the clams.

The waves washing over it would bring in nutrients. As people harvested the clams and cockles, using their digging sticks, they kept the sand loose enough for the shellfish to move about.

Certain people in the community were stewards of the clam gardens. They would observe the condition of the gardens. They would make sure there was no overharvesting. If the quality or number of clams got too low, they would leave the area untouched for a period of time.

Sometimes they would take small clams from another clam beach and “plant” them on a struggling beach.

Scientists have done some tests in clam gardens and found that more clams grow on beaches with walls than regular beaches. As well, clams grow faster and are more likely to survive in clam gardens.

The vast system of clam gardens wasn’t built quickly. They were built over many generations. Families passed on the knowledge and skills involved so that the gardens could be continue to be cared for.

The use of the clam gardens was part of First Nations political and social organization. In some communities certain families or hereditary groups had the use of certain gardens, which were passed down. As well as the rights to use the gardens went the responsibility to care for them.

Sea Garden

The rock walls did more than hold back the sand for the clam gardens. They also created a reef ecosystem where other sea creatures could live, such as octopus, sea cucumbers and chitons. These are all seafood delicacies, and no doubt were an added benefit to the clam gardeners.