

Dig

YOUR DINNER!



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*Clamming on
New Hampshire's
tidal flats*



PHOTO: WWW.BAYMENCHARTERS.COM

Steamed or fried, in chowder or another seafood recipe, soft-shell clams are one of the more popular types of shellfish among seafood lovers. Many New Englanders simply love these delicious treats from our coastal waters. To some, a New England summer simply would not be complete without enjoying a plate of fried clams at a seaside restaurant. To others, the chance to get out on the flats to “dig your own” is an opportunity to connect with a primal instinct to gather one’s own food.

Many like to go clamming simply to be outdoors, to get a chance to see all that goes on in and around the state’s fascinating tidal flats and salt marshes. But one of the most common reasons for clamming has little to do with gathering food or observing nature – people who once spent summers clamming with their grandparents are drawn to clamming not just for food, but to reconnect with the people and places in those childhood memories, and to forge new memories with their own families.

Widely known as “steamers” (or “steamahs”!), softshell clams are denizens of New Hampshire’s tidal mudflats. They can grow to a size of five inches or more across, but for cooking,

two-to-three inch clams are best. The clams burrow in the mud, extending their siphon to feed during high tide, and leaving their tell-tale “clam hole” when they retract their siphon at low tide. When disturbed, they often squirt water from their siphon. These clams do not completely close their shells, which are brittle and easily broken. They burrow into the mud anywhere from a few inches to 18 inches deep, and are dug with short-handled “clam forks.”

The most popular New Hampshire location for clamming is the Hampton/Seabrook estuary, although other areas such as Little Harbor, Great Bay and the Bellamy River also have softshell clams.

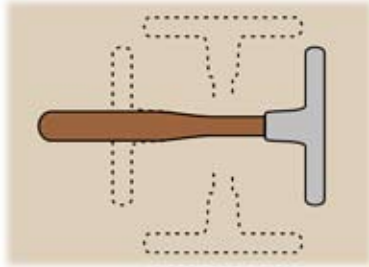
HITTING THE MUD

Ready to play in the mud, and bring home some steamers for a special supper? Clamming requires just a little equipment and a \$30 license. The license, valid January through December, is for residents age 6 and older, and is available at any license agent or online at www.wildnh.com. A free lifetime license is available to those 68 years and up.

BY CHRIS NASH

CAN YOU DIG IT?

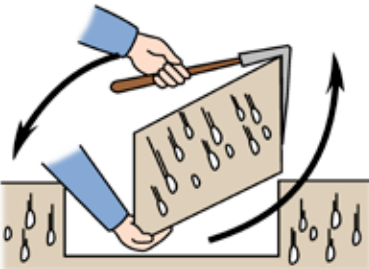
Proper clam digging is one way to help protect and improve New Hampshire clam stocks. Here's the best technique:



1. Select and cut a manageable section of flat on four sides.



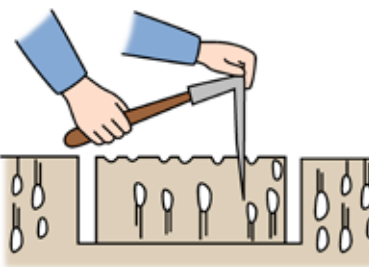
2. Try to judge the location and depth of most clams of suitable size. Work fork into the flat with gentle rocking motion, adjusting angle of fork to move between and under the clam burrows.



3. Turn the piece of flat completely over and place it in the resulting furrow. (Placing the piece to one side may needlessly cover an undug area with small clams vulnerable to smothering.)



4. Pick out the exposed clams that are of suitable size.



5. With fork tines straight downward, gently break up the section of flat to expose the remaining clams.



6. When all harvestable clams have been taken from the piece, simply leave it as it lies in the furrow. This protects the remaining clams from predators such as crabs and gulls. Clams not harvested will gradually return to an upright feeding position.

Clam flats are wet, muddy and sometimes slippery places, so rubber boots are a good idea. Hip or chest waders are ideal for keeping mud off your clothes (and the inside of your car!), for crossing tidal creeks, and for wading into knee-deep water to rinse your shellfish and equipment. Use gloves to protect your hands from sharp shells and abrasive sand and mud.

You'll need a clam fork to dig for softshell clams. Handles must be less than 18 inches long, and can be purchased from local marine equipment and fishing tackle stores. You also need a basket to hold your catch; some people buy a specialized metal clam basket, which allows water and mud to flow through and helps with the task of rinsing mud off the clams. If you plan to use a plain 5-gallon bucket, make a line with permanent marker at the 10-quart mark (half full), to ensure you don't exceed the daily limit. Keep in mind that your license number must be clearly marked on the outside of the clam container and your license must be worn in plain view while harvesting.

After you are properly equipped, you need to decide where to go – there are maps of shellfishing locations in the *N.H. Saltwater Fishing Digest* and on the Department of Environmental Services website at www.des.nh.gov. The softshell clamming season is generally from the first Saturday after Labor Day until the last Saturday in May, with harvesting allowed only on Saturdays to conserve the resource. In some locations, the September-May season may be temporarily closed for water quality reasons, so even during open season, harvesters need to call the "Clam Flat Hotline" (1-800-43-CLAMS) or check the Fish and Game website to see if the flats are open. They are typically updated by 3:00 p.m. on Friday.

Once you know that your clamming area is open for the coming Saturday, check the time of low tide. Tidal mudflats are submerged at high tide, but are typically exposed from about two hours before to about two hours after the time of low tide. This four-hour window can vary in different locations and on different days, so become familiar with your favorite harvest areas and plan accordingly. You will also need to know the time of sunrise/sunset, because clamming is only allowed one half-hour before sunrise to sunset. Information on tides, sunrise and sunset are available in the *N.H. Saltwater Fishing Digest*.

NOW you can start digging! Walk over the mudflats, find some telltale holes in the mud, and put that clam fork to work. Softshell clams have rather brittle and thin shells that are easily broken, so be careful. Use proper digging techniques and get rid of any clams with gaping or broken shells, foul odor or dried meat; these should not be eaten.

Softshell clams can't completely close their shells – this clam is fresh and healthy. Wear gloves to protect your hands from sharp shells.



STATE OF THE RESOURCE

AFTER THE HARVEST

Once you've dug your clams, keep them fresh to prevent possible health issues from improper handling or storage. As with all shellfish, you want to clean the clams of external mud and debris by rinsing in water where you dug them, then rinse and scrub the shells under running water once you get home. Keep your clams cold – use a cooler with ice in transit, and get them into a refrigerator as soon as possible. Place clams in an open plastic or glass container, cover with a clean, wet towel, and store in a dry, cool place – a 32°-42° F refrigerator is ideal. Never store shellfish in an airtight container. If using ice, keep the clams out of the meltwater. Clams are best eaten within a day or two of digging, and can be frozen.

Some people like to soak their softshell clams to get them to purge themselves of dirt and grit inside the shell. If you use local seawater for this purpose, collect it in a clean container, and only take water from areas that are approved for harvesting; you want to soak your clams in clean water!

And how to consume these delicate little creatures? Steam them in fresh or salt water or beer, serve with a little lemon and butter, savor the flavor – and reflect on how gratifying it is to dig your dinner! **W**

Chris Nash heads the N.H. Department of Environmental Services Shellfish Program.



While New Hampshire has many areas to dig clams, unfortunately, the overall clam population has fallen on hard times in recent years. In 1997, researchers estimated a harvestable softshell clam population in Hampton/Seabrook harbor of 25,000 bushels, but that number had fallen to 2,600 bushels for the period of 1997-2004. More recently, the population has risen to 5,400 bushels; this is a good sign, but clearly, clams are far from their peak abundance.



The green crab is a predator of the softshell clam.

Scientists believe there are multiple reasons for the decline. Some feel the ups and downs are typical of a common predator-prey relationship: when clams are plentiful, there is greater harvesting pressure, and populations decline. Once it becomes hard to find clams, harvest pressure eases, and the clams eventually rebound. Other factors – such as disease, clam reproductive success and predation by green crabs – also appear to play a role.

Help protect the resource by using proper digging technique and paying careful attention to limits and regulations. – *CN*

MONITORING FOR SAFETY

Clams and other molluscan shellfish such as mussels are closely monitored because of the way they eat, which is to filter out microscopic bits of food in the water. In this filter-feeding process, shellfish can pick up contaminants from the water – including disease-causing bacteria and viruses – passing those bacteria on to the humans who then harvest and eat them. For this reason, the N.H. Department of Environmental Services regularly tests the pollution risk to shellfish in harvesting areas. Some areas show a high degree of pollution risk because of nearby pollution sources, or because of high bacteria levels observed through sampling programs. Shellfish harvesting is never allowed in these “closed” areas. Some areas may show pollution risk under certain types of weather conditions, or during certain times of the year; these “open” areas are still subject to temporary closures, which can last days, weeks, or even months.

In some years, an ocean outbreak of Paralytic Shellfish Poisoning or PSP – commonly known as “red tide” – can make New Hampshire’s shellfish off-limits to harvesters for long periods. PSP is caused by a “bloom” of microscopic marine plants that produce a potent toxin that affects the human central nervous system. Filter-feeding shellfish can concentrate this toxin in their bodies, and humans who eat the contaminated shellfish risk serious illness or even death. The PSP poison is not destroyed by the heat of cooking. Red tide warnings are posted on the **Clam Flat Hotline (1-800-43-CLAMS)** and the Fish and Game website at **www.wildnh.com** – another important reason to check before you go.

In light of these factors, should you feel comfortable eating clams? The extensive testing and monitoring described above ensures that New Hampshire shellfish are as wholesome as possible by the time they get to your plate. So, if you have clams harvested from open areas or bought at a restaurant or from a reputable dealer – we say, “dig in!”

