Many people are aware that Florida is a major producer of farm-raised hard clams. What they may be less familiar with is that some of those clams are raised right here in southwest Florida (Hard clams and a new aquaculture product—Sunray Venus clams). We have about thirty aquaculturalists involved in some aspect of clam farming, and open water lease sites where clams are grown are located in both Gasparilla Sound and Pine Island Sound.

How it all works —
Clam production begins at a commercial hatchery where adult clams are spawned under controlled conditions and then raised for 10-14 days. Clam larvae are fed micro-algae and grown to about 1 millimeter (1 mm) seed size. From the hatchery, the seed clams go to a land based nursery. The nursery provides small seed with adequate food supply and protection from predators until they reach a field-plantable size (5-6 mm). The nurseries are simple in design, operation, and maintenance.

After the nursery, clams are ready for grow-out at open water lease sites. Seed clams are grown out in soft polyester mesh bags. The bags are planted in rows and secured to bottom with stakes. Naturally accumulating sediments serve as substrate, and the bags in combination with the substrate serve as predator protection. As the clams grow they are transferred from bags with small mesh size to bags with larger mesh size. Once they reach as sellable size (~ 1 inch after 15-18 months) they are removed from the water using harvesting devices (winches and roller rigs). Clams are then washed, graded, sorted, bagged, tagged and shipped.

Did you know? — Hard clams are high in protein and virtually fat free. One dozen clams provide over 100% of the daily advised intake of vitamin B-12 which is necessary for normal function of the nervous system and the production of red blood cells. Sunray Venus clams are also a low-fat source of protein. In fact, a single serving provides about 9 grams of protein, in addition to providing a good complement of minerals and vitamins.

Farm raised Sunray Venus Clams — Photo Betty Staugler
Micro-algae tanks at hatchery — Photo Curtis Hemmel
Seed clams at Nursery — Photos Jennifer Huber
Harvesting clams at lease site — Photo SWFL Shellfish Assoc.

(Continued on page 2)
Are Florida aquacultured clams safe to eat? – Absolutely!!
All aquaculture activities are highly regulated to ensure public safety. Shellfish can only be harvested from waters classified approved, or conditionally approved. Areas classified conditionally approved are periodically closed to harvesting based on pollution events, such as rainfall or increased river flow. The Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (DACS) Shellfish Environmental Assessment Section (SEAS) is responsible for classifying and monitoring SHAs.

What about red tide? – SHAs are closed during red tide events when water samples collected and analyzed by a certified laboratory are determined to not meet water quality standards. Even after water quality standards are met, product may not be harvested until an assessment of the shellfish meat meets Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and State approval guidelines. The controls in place on the industry have resulted in no documented cases of NSP from Florida aquacultured clams over the period of record. There have however been documented cases of NSP in persons who have recreationally harvested clams (and other shellfish) during SHA closures. So a word to the wise, know when and where you may recreationally harvest by visiting www.floridaaquaculture.com or buy farm raised product.

Hungry Yet?
Check out these tasty Fresh From Florida recipes!

Neurotoxic shellfish poisoning (NSP) is caused by eating shellfish contaminated with the brevetoxins produced by the red tide organism Karenia brevis.