



Continued from Page 4

Seaweed is an essential part of shallow coastal ecosystems. It is to these marine habitats as trees are to forests, providing food and shelter to a variety of vertebrates and invertebrates.

Contrary to popular belief, seaweeds are not aquatic plants; rather, they are considered algae. Algae do share some similarities with plants. For example, both organisms turn sunlight into sugars through photosynthesis. However, algae do not have the more specialized tissues that plants do, such as xylem and phloem. While the taxonomic debate continues, for now we can say that seaweed is not, strictly speaking, a plant.

There are three main groups of seaweed: green, red, and brown. These describe general trends in color, though individual shades can vary, and many “brown” seaweeds lean toward olive green. They range in size from small, lobed leaves growing like lettuce on rocks, to large, narrow lancets that can reach over one hundred feet long. Each strand of seaweed grows from an attachment point known as a holdfast, which anchors it to a rock or other solid object for life.

The easiest seaweeds to find are those growing on or near the shoreline. One of the most common here is

SEAWEED IS AN ESSENTIAL PART OF SHALLOW COASTAL ECOSYSTEMS. IT IS TO THESE MARINE HABITATS AS TREES ARE TO FORESTS, PROVIDING FOOD AND SHELTER TO A VARIETY OF VERTEBRATES AND INVERTEBRATES.

rockweed (*Fucus distichus*). This seaweed looks vaguely like a bundle of lobed fingers, some with gas-filled bubbles on the ends, and each with a visible central vein. Feather boa kelp (*Egregia menziesii*) looks very much like its namesake, with many small, thin leaves growing around a central stipe (stem). Turkish washcloth (*Mastocarpus papillatus*) is distinctive looking, with rough-textured, wavy brown leaves. You might even find laver/nori (*Porphyra* spp.), which can look similar to a plastic bag floating in the water. This is the seaweed used to make sushi. Finally, it’s hard to miss the bright green of sea lettuce (*Ulva* spp.)

Some subtidal species may require a boat if you want to get a good look at them alive. Bull kelp (*Nereocystis luetkeana*) is probably the best-known – a single hollow stipe reaching upwards of 120 feet in length, which terminates in a gas-filled bulb. Several leaves grow from this bulb, and some of these can reach eleven yards long.

Most seaweed found on the Ore-

gon and Washington Coasts is native. However, Japanese wireweed (*Sargassum muticum*) is invasive. Thankfully though, it’s edible, so the more you eat, the more you remove competition for native species. In fact, most of the seaweed species you’re likely to find in the Pacific Northwest are edible.

Others, however, can be dangerous to serve up. Witch’s hair (*Desmarestia aculeata*) can produce sulfuric acid if damaged, which will ruin any other seaweed it touches. Always be completely sure you know what species you have before you harvest it, and that it’s edible before you eat it.

In Oregon, you can only pick live seaweed from March 1 through June 15, but you can harvest seaweed washed up on shore any time. In the latter case, you should be sure it is very fresh, as it can rot quickly. The daily limit is one gallon per person and three gallons total per year. Also, each harvester needs to bring their own container. Seaweed must be harvested by hand or with a knife, and no harvesting

is allowed in marine reserves or other protected areas.

Washington has similar rules, with a 10 pound per day limit per person (seaweed must be weighed wet.) Seaweed may not be sold or bartered, and you need a shellfish/seaweed license to collect any amount for personal use. Tools except for knives or scissors are prohibited.

To harvest seaweed, cut or tear the leaves away from the stem or holdfast. Make sure to leave the holdfast intact on its anchor so that it can grow back. Seaweed needs to be washed thoroughly as it is often loaded with sand — an initial wash in the ocean helps remove small invertebrates that can then be safely returned to the water. Most edible seaweed can be eaten raw, and more delicate species can lend themselves well to salads. Seaweed can also be dried, pickled, and even lightly sauteed or stir-fried!

Rebecca Lexa is an Oregon Master Naturalist, nature educator, tour guide, and writer living on the Long Beach Peninsula. More about her work may be found at RebeccaLexa.com.