



History of Seaweed



Seaweed has been used in Guernsey for thousands of years, serving a wide range of purposes, as a fertiliser, as a source of iodine, for fuel, and as a valuable supply of food.

Few island customs, except perhaps the Clameur de Haro, which survive today can claim as ancient a history as that of "vraicing." In 1607 Royal Commissioners sent to the island by King James I were petitioned by the inhabitants to perpetuate their "*ancient right to gather vraic*".

The foreshore (the part of a beach between high and low-water marks) of Guernsey is owned by the Crown, however, Guernsey citizens have the right to collect seaweed for any purposes.

Seaweed was the only fertiliser used by farmers for many centuries. Its use was considered vital for healthy crops -

"point de vraic, point de hautgard - no seaweed, no cornyard" local proverb.

Types of Seaweed

All seaweed species were used, however, there was thought to be a difference between drift seaweed and

seaweed which was cut from the rocks, the latter being the more valuable crop.

The "Vraic scie" is attached to the rocks and is cut off by bill-hooks or sickles. When cutting the seaweed, only ever cut the top two thirds of the plant. If it is ripped off the rocks it will not regrow.

"Vraic scie" was more prized, and worth two or three times as much as the "Vraic venant" which is drift-weed. Both were used as fertiliser and their value as such varied with the time of year, the summer crop being superior to that gathered in winter.

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Modern testing has shown no difference between fresh cut seaweed compared to drift weed, and no additional benefit for the soil. However, seaweed begins to rot between 1-7 days after it is washed up on the beach. Once the seaweed is rotting, then there is a slow decline in nutritional value.

Applying it to the land

The seaweed can be applied to the ground while fresh and allowed to rot, or dried first and ploughed or dug in. Alternatively, another popular and convenient form of use was as ashes after burning. The burnt residue is rich in potash, iron, iodine and other mineral salts.

Harvesting

The seasons for harvesting of vraic have always been controlled by the Guernsey Court of Chief Pleas, and these have varied during the centuries.

In the 18th Century, for the first time, there was a restriction on collection of seaweed that stipulated residents from each parish could only collect from beaches within their parish. This led to the residents of St Andrews, the only landlocked parish, being given sole rights to collect seaweed from the island of Lihou.

Guernsey is the only place in the world where the right to collect seaweed is enshrined in law, and this underlines the importance of seaweed to the island, at a time when farmers were producing the food required for all islanders, plus more for export.



Vraicing, circa 1903

Today in Guernsey, drift seaweed is still used by gardeners and a handful of farmers, including Rocquette Cider farm, who collect it by tractor and trailer, mix it with other farm waste, and spread it round the apple trees.

It is difficult to ascertain precisely why the farming community stopped using seaweed. The occupation of the island by the Germans in the second world war certainly didn't help, as a number of beaches were mined, and permission had to be sought from the occupying forces in order to go onto the remaining beaches. The subsequent rise of chemical fertilisers in the 1950s and 1960s led to the practice being almost forgotten.

Rituals

No individual had rights to any particular harvesting area, this was done for the good of the community rather than the individual. 21st June was the opening of the seaweed harvesting season, marked by a special celebration at this time. As well as being Midsummers Day, this was celebrated locally as the Festival of St Jean, even though the official day of that festival is 24th June.

Farmers would decorate their horses and carts with flowers and garlands, and at sunrise on the 21st June they would proceed down the slipways to start the first seaweed collection of the season. Women and children would collect crabs, lobsters and ormers from among the rocks. That evening there would be a feast. The centre part of that feast would be a lliet d'fouille (a green bed, the mattress stuffed with seaweed) with a local maiden (La Môme) on top, to whom all would come and pay their respects.

Use of Seaweed Today

During the Covid 19 pandemic Ben & Naomi Tustin from Guernsey Seaweed teamed up with Luke Wheadon from the Channel Islands Liqueur Company to make a seaweed hand sanitiser. Since then Ben and Naomi have been making food seasonings and other edible products as well as skincare and bath products. Many hotels across the island use the bath products in their bathrooms, replacing many thousands of throw away single use plastic bottles by using refillable containers.

Find out more about seaweed in Guernsey by visiting www.guernseyseaweed.com