

Sea- based facial treatments like a day at the beach

Seaweed, ocean mud and saltwater gathered along B. C. coast form the basis of SeaFlora Skincare's spa-based product

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With her skincare line called SeaFlora, Diane Bernard is a third-generation seaweed harvester.

If your idea of bliss is lying on the beach and breathing in the scents of the sea, you don't have to wait until next summer to experience that sensation again. Close your eyes and inhale while having a SeaFlora facial and you'll imagine yourself by the ocean — minus the feeling of sand between your toes. And unlike a day in the hot sun, it's actually good for your skin.

Six years ago, Diane Bernard founded SeaFlora Skincare, a spa-based line of products based on ingredients gathered from B. C.'s coastal waters — seaweed, ocean mud and seawater.

If that sounds more pungent than pleasant to you, Bernard points out that the fishy-smelling seaweed that washes up on the shore is actually “the compost pile of the ocean garden.”

“We would never judge a vegetable or flower garden by the look, smell or texture of a compost pile,” she says. “But we do that with the ocean.”

A high-quality seaweed product shouldn't smell fishy or off-putting, Bernard says. With SeaFlora products, “most people embrace the smell — it's part of the authenticity of it,” she says. “The smell evokes some wonderful memories for people.”

In Europe, Bernard points out, thalassotherapy — which uses seawater, seaweed and ocean mud applied to the skin in various ways — is considered a legitimate form of treatment for ailments ranging from asthma to arthritis and high blood pressure.

Bernard knows her sea stuff — she is a third-generation seaweed harvester, following in the footsteps of her eastcoast fishing family that used seaweed for everything from keeping lobsters cool while out at sea to insulating their homes.

After a career in criminal justice and economic development, she decided she wanted to try her hand at a value-added business based on natural resources. “I never really thought of the commercial aspects of seaweed until then,” she says. “It was a real big ‘aha’ for me.”

From her home base near Sooke on Vancouver Island, she started marketing high-quality seaweeds to B. C. chefs, and now sells to top restaurants like C, Tojo and Sooke Harbour House.

That led Bernard to explore the possibility of expanding her horizons to skin-care products. Seaweed absorbs nutrients very efficiently

and is therefore high in trace minerals and potent antioxidants like vitamins A, E and C — all of which are beneficial to the skin. The SeaFlora line started out with four products in 2001 and will have grown to 24 by the end of this year, she says. They're sold only through spas in the eastern U. S. and across Canada, including Vancouver's Spruce Body Lab.

It was there I experienced the works — a SeaFlora facial and Eye Sea Relief treatment.

Nicole started my facial with a toner and cleanser that smelled like an invigorating splash of seawater. That was followed by three different masques: first, a tingly exfoliating one made with ocean mud and kaolin clay, then a second purifying treatment of clay and mud, and finally third containing seaweed gel.

A seaweed serum and moisturizer rounded out this part of the treatment. Trust me, if you're not mentally transported to the seashore by this point, you've lived inland your entire life.

The eye treatment was an even more pleasant surprise. After massaging a seaweed oil and moisturizer around my eyes, Nicole gently applied a pair of Signature Eye Chamois to the under-eye area.

Bernard later explained that these are dried pieces of a giant kelp that, when reconstituted with water, exude a luxurious gel that reduces puffiness and dark circles. They were certainly cool and refreshing, and when the treatment's done, you can even take them home with you — let them dry out and then revive them with water when you want to banish the effects of a late night out.

I left the spa with skin that felt cool, toned and smooth, and visions of driftwood washing up on a long expanse of white sand.

Do you remember the Seinfeld episode where Kramer tries to flog his idea of a fragrance that smells like the beach? He just might have been on to something, but Diane Bernard did him one better.

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