



ABOVE: Diane Bernard is in her element gathering seaweed. TOP: Leading tours of her ocean garden, Bernard espouses the virtues of seaweed

Coastal Cultivation

Known as Vancouver Island's Seaweed Lady, Diane Bernard, founder of Outer Coast Seaweeds, shares her passion for kelp.

HERE ON THE OUTER COAST OF THE PACIFIC Northwest, I am fortunate to live in an area that has one of the cleanest coastlines in the world, home to a rich variety of seaweed. I am licensed to harvest a 43-mile stretch of ocean shoreline that has more than 700 species of exotic, wild seaweeds. I own Outer Coast Seaweeds, which manufactures wild seaweed products for the spa industry and am known locally as the Seaweed Lady.

My childhood summers were spent with my family at our home on Les Îles de la Madeleine on the Canadian Atlantic coast where seaweed was commonly found. I recall fishermen taking lobsters wrapped in seaweed to market and women tossing a handful of seaweed into steaming pots of clams or mussels. As children, we draped ourselves with

seaweeds and paraded along the beach. Men, including my Acadian father, chewed dulse, a type of dried seaweed, as if it were chewing gum.

After earning my graduate degree in criminology and spending years working in the criminal justice system, I settled on the Canadian Pacific coast with my husband and children. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, I worked in local politics, with a focus on education and environmental issues. But in 1999—tired of life as a local politician and yearning to find a new mid-life career—I decided to put my energy and love of seaweed into practice.

With this in mind, I began Outer Coast Seaweeds, a “sea change” if you will, from my previous life. Once, my days were dictated by board-

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ABOVE: Bernard uses the entire seaweed plant in creating her Outer Coast Seaweeds product line. RIGHT: On her tours, she helps others identify the various forms of seaweed.

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rooms and meeting schedules. Now, tide tables guide my movements. As a seaweed enthusiast and entrepreneur, I initially developed Outer Coast Seaweeds to work with local chefs in creating modern seaweed cuisine for their menus. Research shows that seaweeds are complete proteins, containing all the essential amino acids and packing more vitamins and trace mineral elements than any other plant on the planet. And with fresh seaweeds’ subtle taste, it is exceptionally nutritious. In the last 20 years, advanced research has confirmed that it contains both anti-inflammatory and anti-tumor properties. Plus, seaweed is excellent for sensitive and dry skin. It relieves irritated skin, redness, rashes, and even burns. This is exciting news for the spa industry.

While I enjoyed working with creative and artistic chefs—many of whom worked in high-end hotels with spas—I believed the spa industry was missing the boat. I knew that seaweed-based products were part of the spa marketplace, but I thought my company could bring a different perspective. With this in mind, I set out to bring the spa industry seaweed skincare products from my ocean garden. I wanted Outer Coast Seaweeds spa



products to reflect the beautiful, diverse, and exotic nature of this wild ocean garden. So, we began our work with the whole seaweed plant, not seaweed extracts. With selective hand-harvested techniques, we made fresh seaweed the main ingredient of Outer Coast Seaweeds products. We work with the natural texture and color of seaweeds, not bleached by-products. The fiber in our seaweed products is clean and unscented. It holds vitamins and trace minerals, as well as moisture, which helps to rehydrate the skin. Living seaweeds are sweet smelling; not dried, colorless extracts with a quasi-fishy smell. I created spa products that incorporated all of these elements.

Again, I began promoting my seaweeds, but
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this time at the most forward-looking spa operations in British Columbia. With the guidance and expertise of spa directors at **The Spa at Delta Victoria Ocean Pointe Resort** (Victoria), **Spa at Four Seasons Resort Whistler** (Whistler), **Kingfisher Oceanside Spa** (Courtenay), **Grotto Spa at Tigh-Na-Mara** (Parksville), **Aerie Spa** (Malahat), and the **Spa at Sooke Harbour House** (Sooke), I found ways to bring fresh, wild Pacific seaweed into thalassotherapy treatments. With feedback from spa experts, I blended a dozen different seaweeds with glacial and mountain clays, ocean mud, and essential oils from the indigenous plants of the Canadian wilderness. I carefully developed a line of wild seaweed spa products, including body wraps, exfoliants, lotions, serums, gels, and soaks containing fresh wild seaweed.

By working with different seaweeds and their various strengths, the effects of wild seaweeds that are sweet, cleansing, and nutritional are transmitted into lush, re-hydrating, and intensely moisturizing products for the body. This is the foundation of the Outer Coast Seaweeds Spa Program, which is flexible enough to accommodate grassroots spa professionals with small operations, as well as larger spas that incorporate three-hour seaweed thalassotherapy treatments. We’ve definitely gone beyond the typical marine algae wrap.

There are barriers to the acceptance of this new, wholesome approach to seaweeds. North Americans generally perceive seaweeds as icky, oozy, and strong-smelling. Many people don’t realize that the thick tangle of kelp washed ashore is the ocean’s compost, not the seaweeds to be eaten or applied to our bodies. Just as we don’t judge a vegetable or flower garden by the look, smell, or texture of a compost pile, we shouldn’t judge the ocean garden by the composted dead seaweed on shore. To combat misconceptions, Outer Coast Seaweeds makes education an important business component. In fact, one of our basic educational product knowledge seminars begins with hands-on training. When I hold introductory seaweed seminars, I pull rubber boots and walking sticks out of the back of my car. Spa directors, reflexologists, health and wellness practitioners, and reporters pull them on and head out with me into the low tide. They stride over the compost pile



ABOVE: Bernard works with seaweeds of varying strengths.

of shore seaweeds into the ocean, stopping to snip, eat, and wear every kind of living seaweed I wave in front of them: *Alaria*, *Egregia*, *Hedophyllum*, *Iridaea*, *Nereocystis*, *Porphyra*, *Rockweed*, and *Ulva Lactuca*. They discover their bounty is clean, sweet, and tasty. It’s another “sea-change”—watching their conversion to understanding the nutritional benefits of whole, wild seaweeds.

Today, we are recognized for innovation in products, excellent growth, and our strong ethics in environmental sustainable principals and practices. Outer Coast Seaweeds is also expanding beyond Vancouver Island and mainland British Columbia. Nonetheless, my meeting schedules are still dictated by the low tide, and when I lead my educational sales team into boardrooms, our briefcases don’t contain flow charts but fresh seaweed. I have been very fortunate with my “sea-changes.”

With our seaweed spa products and our educational and training services, we assist spa directors and practitioners to design programs and menus that bring to the consumer spa experiences that reflect the diversity and exotic nature of the outer coast’s ocean garden.—**Diane Bernard**

Diane Bernard, known as the Seaweed Lady of Vancouver Island, is the founder of Outer Coast Seaweeds, which is based in Whiffen Spit, near Sooke, B.C. She can be reached at (877) 713-7464; www.outercoastseaweeds.com.