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## **Seaweed can beautify, but it tastes great, too**

[Odd Jobs by Diane Peters](#)

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Nine years ago, Diane Bernard decided to launch her own business. But what? The expert in criminology, who's now 56, would sit on the shore near her home in Sooke, B.C., chewing seaweed and thinking of a concept that incorporated the coastal, natural world.

She chewed seaweed as she walked through the forest, checking out wild plants with product potential. She gnawed on more seaweed during fact-finding meetings with businesspeople.

She began gardening, and tried using seaweed as a fertilizer. In a chat with a chef one day, she idly mentioned seaweed. "Wow, that's different!" was the response.

Soon after, she was lugging pails of the green stuff into high-end kitchens and chefs used it for wraps and sauces. She got a seaweed harvesting permit that covered 69 kilometres of shoreline, began reading up on this amazing ocean plant (400 varieties on the Pacific coast; fastest growing plant in the world) and spent most days between March 21 and Sept. 21 on the water.

She'd go out at low tide with rubber boots, a backpack, a walking stick and a knife, hook or pair of scissors. Seaweed anchors itself to rocks with a holdfast and if you cut it instead of yanking it up, it will grow back. She'd taste as she went and would pile 30 pounds of harvest on her back. With rough waters at her feet and such a heavy load, it was physically gruelling work. And since storms could rise up quickly and even in summer the water was extremely cold, it was also dangerous.

Bernard loved the taste of seaweed. But the rest of the Canada? Not so much. With just a handful of local chefs buying her low-priced product, she brought in a mere \$5,000 her first year in business.

Then, in 2002, a hotel chef introduced her to the manager of the adjacent spa. Bernard knew this was it. She started talking with spa managers. They loved the idea of seaweed products and told her how the industry worked.

Bernard created her first Seaflora Skincare product that year: A seaweed and B.C. glacial clay body wrap. Now, she's got 26 products and seven full-time employees.

She also has a team of part-timers who harvest from shore or on her five boats. Bernard still spends a lot of time on the water: Observing the seaweed in winter months, doing water quality tests twice a year, helping with the harvest or running her seaweed coastal tours.

Bernard sells her certified organic, all-Canadian product line with reassurances that seaweed does wonders for the skin. But she still loves to chew on the stuff. Sure, it's full of vitamins and minerals, but it tastes great, too: Some varieties resemble zucchini, while others have an herbal flavour. "It's a total surprise in the mouth, in a good way."