I go digging for clams once every two or three years
Just to keep my hand in (I usually cut it),
And I’m sure that whenever I do so I tell the same story
Of how, at the age of four, I was trapped by the tide
As I clammed a sandbar. It’s no story at all,
But I tell it and tell it. It serves my small lust
To be thought of as someone who’s lived.
I’ve a war too to fall back on, and some years of flying,
As well as a high quota of drunken parties,
A wife and children; but somehow the clamming thing
Gives me an image of me that soothes my psyche
Like none of the louder events: me helpless,
Alone with my sandpail,
As fate in the form of soupy Long Island Sound
Comes stalking me.

I’ve a son now at that age.
He’s spoiled. He’s been sickly.
He’s handsome and bright, affectionate and demanding.
I think of the tides when I look at him.
I’d have him alone and sea-girt, poor little boy.

The self, what a brute it is. It wants, wants.
It will not let go of its even most fictional grandeur,
But must grope, grope down in the muck of its past
For some little squirting life and bring it up tenderly
To the lo and behold of death, that it may weep
And pass on the weeping, keep the thing going.

Son, when you clam,
Watch out for the tides and take care of yourself,
Yet no great care,
Lest you care too much and talk of the caring
And bore your best friends and inhibit your children and sicken
At last into opera on somebody’s sandbar. Son, when you clam,
Clam.
Digging it on the Connecticut Coast
by Nancy Balcom

There once was a clammer named Tess
Who had rake talents claimed as the best
Digging sand for the show
For clams hiding below
From dinner her ultimate quest

My colleague, Tessa, is an avid clammer. She grew up claming with her father and is now instilling that same joy of shellfishing in her children. She finds it infinitely satisfying to squish her toes into the sand while dragging a rake across the bottom, listening for that telltale “scritch” sound. She’s not alone in her desire to bring home fresh clams for dinner – typically between 8,000 and 10,000 recreational shellfish permits are issued each year in Connecticut. That’s a lot of clammers – and harvested clams (not to mention mussels, oysters, and steamers)!

In Connecticut, recreational shellfishing is offered in 16 coastal communities with 15 local shellfish commissions managing the shellfish resources in town waters. According to Stephen Goldschmidt, Chair of the Guilford Shellfish Commission and Vice Chair of the Connecticut Sea Grant Extension Advisory Board, “Volunteer shellfish commissioners have a range of responsibilities. They set species harvest size and catch limits and enforce local regulations. They sell permits, stock clams and oysters on recreational beds and work to provide additional shellfishing opportunities. Commissioners ensure that the shellfishing waters are marked with open/closed signs, demarcation signs and buoys.”

“Then there’s water sampling, shellfish meat sampling, water sampling, and more water sampling...working with the State to classify the water quality of the shellfish grounds correctly to ensure public safety.” he adds. Recreational shellfishing enthusiasts, who benefit from the extensive effort put in by these commission members, can buy their permits and harvest hard clams, steamers, oysters, and mussels in these locally-regulated shellfishing areas.

What does it take to be a properly equipped recreational clammer? Well, shellfishing requires a local permit, a rake with tines spaced an inch or more apart, a basket to hold the catch, and a shellfish ring, slot or size gauge. Recreational shellfishers need to be familiar with local regulations and must call the local shellfish information hotline or check status signs to make sure it is legal and safe to shellfish in a particular area before venturing forth into the water for these succulent bivalve treasures.

For individuals drawn to the idea of harvesting their own fresh bivalves but unsure how to go about it, the answer can be found in locally sponsored “clam digs.” A number of local shellfish commissions sponsor these events in the spring and summer, enabling people to enjoy themselves while learning the ropes, and bringing home the key ingredient for a nice healthy shellfish meal.

“I think Madison was the first to sponsor community clam digs, starting about six or seven years ago,” says Steve Nikituk, Chair of the Madison Shellfish Commission. “These events are family friendly. About 25 to 50 percent of our participants come back year after year with their kids. We have a shellfishing area for...
adults, as well as a special shallow water area designed for small children. No experience is required – Commission members supply rakes and demonstrate clamming techniques for beginners. It’s a great way for people to get introduced to recreational shellfishing.”

Nikituk continues, “About two weeks before the event, the Commission purchases 1000s of local clams from a commercial harvester and holds a ‘clam toss’ to seed the area designated for adult shellfishing. This gives the clams time to settle into the sand. We also have an ongoing oyster restoration effort on the Neck River. We buy oyster seed from a hatchery on Long Island and grow the oysters in cages in the River. Before the clam dig, we take some of these oysters and disperse them near shore so folks can harvest oysters as well as clams.”

Steve Straka, a former Madison Shellfish Commissioner, volunteers each year to oversee the kids’ area. Straka marks out the shallow area and distributes the clams on the day of the “dig” so they are easily accessible to the toes and fingers of the shellfishing kids. He keeps an eye on the little clammers while showing them how to find bivalve treasures. Those who find specially painted clams win an additional toy prize.

These special shellfishing events organized by shellfish commissions help promote Connecticut’s shellfish resources while encouraging both locals and out-of-towners to come out and enjoy the Sound. “Clam digs” are team efforts that involve local commission members, local departments of health and recreation, and local commercial shellfish harvesters. Held in shallow shellfishing areas classified as “Approved” or “Conditionally Approved” by the Connecticut Department of Agriculture/Bureau of Aquaculture, they are typically scheduled to fall a couple of hours before and after low tide (to avoid Reed Whitemore’s experience as a 4-year old – see page 12). Shellfish Commissioners typically work with local commercial shellfish harvesters to restock the areas before each event, so no one heads home disappointed. Day passes are sold to those who don’t hold a recreational shellfishing permit, with the hope that they will become seasonal permit holders in the future.

In Branford, the Shellfish Commission recently began partnering with the East Shore District Health Department to sponsor community clam digs. The digs are held in honor of former shellfish commissioners, William Davis and Joseph Dube. Initial financial support for the digs was provided in part by an Agriculture Viability grant from the Department of Agriculture. Connecticut Sea Grant, the Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection, the Connecticut Bathing Beach Monitoring Program, the Sound School in New Haven, the Connecticut Seafood Council and the Owenego Inn also contributed to the success of the digs by providing educational materials, assistance, or in the case of the Inn, serving as the host for the event.

“We had somewhere between 125 and 150 people participate, with 60 or more trying their hand at clamming at any one time,” said Lori Romick, a sanitarian with the East Shore District Health Department in Branford and Chair of the Connecticut Sea Grant Extension Advisory Board. “Participants were encouraged to hunt for specially marked green clams so they could claim a prize, such as a new clam rake or local seafood market gift card,” she added. “Once out of the water, they could sample a variety of shellfish. We had locally licensed caterers preparing and serving steamed clams, raw shucked clams and oysters, and two types of clam chowder.” Recipes and “how to shuck” guides were handed out while chefs demonstrated the fine art of opening clams and oysters safely and effectively. (Author’s take - The point is NOT to put the point of the shucking knife through one’s palm!)

The events in Branford also offered participants an array of educational materials about Long Island Sound, shellfish/seafood safety, non-point source pollution and water quality. As the ‘happy as a clam’ clammers headed home, they were given an insulated seafood bag and cold pack. “We wanted to promote seafood safety by providing the means for chilling the shellfish during the ride home,” said Romick. The bags were produced through a cooperative partnership among Sea Grant, the Bureau of Aquaculture, and the Seafood Council.

“It’s wonderful to have people come up to you at the end of the day to thank you and tell you that this is the best time they’ve had in years,” says Nikituk. “It makes it all worthwhile.”

Nancy Balcom is the associate director and extension program leader for Connecticut Sea Grant.