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Seaweed-n'-feed

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By Alex Féthière

Photo in the print edition: Bull kelp, the second and third seaweeds from the left in this illustration, is used commercially to make bioactive plant auxiliaries. (Public domain illustration)

Walking on the shores of Harstine Island reminds us of the ocean's plenty and the interrelatedness of all living things. Our inland sea blossoms with life that contributes to our health and that of the land.

You might eat some oysters and clams or nibble some sea beans, but there's more on the shore than human snacks. Bears have distributed sea elements by eating salmon in forests, and seaweed can be useful for contributing nutrients that are lacking in our gardens. Prior to the mining done today, the 1915 USDA publication "Potash from Kelp" explained the West Coast's rich vegetal sources of potassium salts.

In permacultural thinking, seaweed stacks a lot of functions: feeding people and animals, reversing ocean acidification, bolstering Native food sovereignty. Intact, it provides a habitat for fish and microfauna — the depletion of bull kelp in Puget Sound has occasioned the endangerment of three rockfish species, and the denuding of eelgrass has compromised the transition of juvenile salmon to marine environments.

Responsibly harvested, seaweed also adds organic matter to the soil. One radical illustration is in Ireland's Aran Islands, where people plant potatoes and vegetables in layered beds of seaweed and sand erected on rock.

John Seymour's "Complete Book of Self-Sufficiency" was my introduction to the use of seaweed on a homestead. He recommends using it in your pastures, where its selenium in particular will benefit ruminants. He recommends heavily mulching asparagus with seaweed (4 to 5 inches of it in autumn, raked aside in spring if it hasn't rotted down) because the plant needs salt and benefits from mineral supplementation.

I've seaweed-mulched my asparagus faithfully for years, but it has failed to thrive, probably because my weeding has been subpar. I thought that slugs might be deterred from eating down the crowns of the asparagus with seaweed salts, but it seemed only to provide them seasoning for their banquet.

A handful per plant is too little. This year I'm using more seaweed and weeding better.

While collecting (never cutting) seaweed at low tide, I noticed deer tracks around particularly thick patches. They were driven to leave the forest cover in pursuit of an essential foodstuff.

Deer with inadequate selenium in their diets may suffer white muscle disease, which can afflict domesticated quadrupeds like cattle, sheep and goats. Some studies find that selenium deficiency increases susceptibility to deer ticks.

Selenium is important to human beings as well. The easiest source for it in a globalized world is Brazil nuts, three of which supply all the selenium one needs in a day. Too much can be toxic, which I wish I'd known long ago.

The plenitude of selenium and other trace minerals in seaweed informs their cross-cultural food value. Asian markets drive the expansion of stateside enterprises to supply them, and classier eateries from Vancouver, Washington, to Victoria feature seaweeds in garnishes, pickles and sautés.

Although our soil is rich in selenium, much of it is unassimilable in the garden because of our heavy seasonal rains, which change its chemistry. The readily available form draping the beach is a great supplement of which we can legally harvest 10 pounds per day — though I can't ascertain whether that limit applies only to stationary seaweed like bull kelp attached to Puget Sound's floor.

The addition of seaweed to mulch mixtures and compost enriches the texture, adds minerals and growth hormones like auxins, cytokinins and gibberellins. These boost root development, tip growth and cell division in plants, and are one reason seaweed extracts are so popular as fertilizer.

So if you're like me and never stop thinking about your garden, spoil your next scenic walk on the beach by toting a smelly bag of seaweed. Your greener friends will thank you.

Addendum: My past columns about Archangel Ancient Tree Archive have inundated Dave Pearsall with requests for giant sequoias and coast redwoods. I'm helping the organization by distributing some trees in the Harstine Island area. If you'd like some reach out to me at the e-mail address below.

■ *Alex Féthière has lived on Harstine Island long enough to forget New York City, where he built community gardens and double-dug his suburban sod into a victory garden. He can be reached at onlandist@gmail.com.*