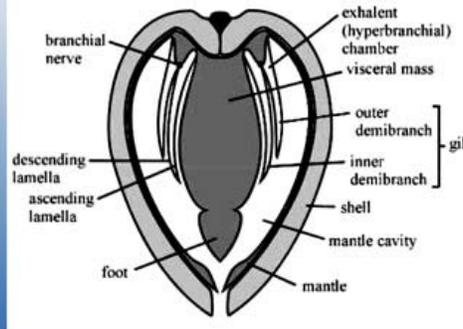


# QUAHOG

**Colloquial Nicknames:**  
**Hard-shell Clam**  
**Cherrystone, Littleneck**  
**Scientific Name:**  
***Mercenaria mercenaria***



**Field Markings:** Shell is shiny lemon yellow, golden-orange, brownish, silvery black or pale buff. Lower valve is white.  
**Size:** 1 to 3 inches in diameter

**Habitat:** Shallow waters, beaches, oyster beds, mollusk shells  
**Seasonal Appearance:** Year-round

## DISTINGUISHING FEATURES AND BEHAVIORS

Quahogs, or hard-shell clams, are bivalve shellfish that inhabit the mud flats of Narragansett Bay. The name quahog comes from the Indian name “popuauhock,” meaning “horse fish.”

Quahogs, which can live up to 40 years, are found along the temperate eastern seaboard from Canada to Florida. Their population is most concentrated in estuaries between Cape Cod and New Jersey where salinity is less than that of the open ocean.

Quahogs do not remain fixed in one spot for life; they move through the mud using a muscular foot. With two short siphons, the quahog filters water in and out of its shell, absorbing plankton, bacteria and oxygen. Quahogs are extremely efficient filter feeders, and larger ones can filter about a gallon of water per hour.

Common predators include sea stars, whelks, crabs, snails, birds, some fish and humans. The entire body of the quahog is edible, not just the large adductor muscle that is found in larger species of clams. Empty shells with a small hole the size of a



pencil point are evidence of consumption by moon snails, dog whelks or oyster drills.

## RELATIONSHIP TO PEOPLE

Quahogs are prized as a human food and constitute one of Narragansett Bay’s most important fisheries. Unfortunately, human activity threatens the survival of this species. Since quahogs are filter feeders, they absorb bacteria and viruses from polluted waters; if eaten, these clams can make people sick. However, if pollution in the water stops, the quahog can clean itself simply through its regular filtering action. Shellfish are often used as an indicator of Bay health by measuring the pollutant levels of these animals in a specific area.

Narragansett Bay once provided 25% of the nation’s supply of hard-shell clams. Due to pollution caused mainly by sewer overflows and stormwater runoff, about 60% of the Bay’s shellfish beds are closed permanently or on a conditional basis. Conditional closures are determined by the amount of rainfall that occurs over the course of time.

The Latin name *Mercenaria mercenaria* is derived from a word that means “wages” and was given to the quahog due to the native peoples use of its purple inner shell or “wampum” as money and jewelry.

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