

The bay quahaug (*Mercenaria mercenaria*) is a hard shelled clam of the family Veneridae. It is also known by a variety of names such as northern quahaug (also spelled quahog and sometimes misspelled cowhog), little neck, hard shell clam, or cherrystone. Some of the names are derived from the commercial fishery, e.g. little necks are 1 1/2" - 2", cherrystones are 2" - 2 1/2", mediums 2 1/2" - 3", and chowders are 3" and larger. The minimum legal size on P.E.I. is 2" (50 mm.) with a maximum growth size of 5" (13 cm.)

Quahaugs are common in the bays and estuaries around P.E.I. They have thick, hard white to grayish white shells and are oval in appearance. Externally they have raised concentric ridges which are evident in younger clams and, as the clam ages, the outside is worn smooth. The inside of the shell has a distinctive purple coloured muscle scar. If you run your finger over the inside rounded portion of the shell, you will feel the toothed inner margin (rough to the touch).

External colour can be altered depending on the bottom sediment. Sandy areas usually produce white shells while soft mud produces a dark to almost black exterior.

Clams similar to the quahaug include the ocean quahaug (*Artica islandica*) found in very deep waters in the Northumberland Strait. Another is the false quahaug (*Pitar morrhuana*) whose maximum size is 2" (50 mm). The shells are white sometimes with an orangy-red tinge. The inner margin of the rounded shell will feel smooth to the touch.

As you drive across the North River Causeway and look downstream towards the harbour mouth, you may have noticed several sticks in the mud or dories with red flags. These are used in the contaminated shellfish relay program. The type of contamination is from fecal coliform which is readily cleansed in pure water areas. We are fortunate not to have to contend with heavy industry producing cadmium, mercury, lead, etc.



The relay is a strictly regulated fishery in which the quahaugs are harvested with tongs (similar to oyster tongs) or by hand and then put in mesh bags, sealed, tagged, and shipped to a depuration site (the area with clean water where they clean themselves of the coliform bacteria). Such a site is located at MacWilliams Seafoods located on the Hillsborough (East) River at Fort Augustus. The quahaugs in the mesh bags are placed on the cleanwater lease site and allowed to cleanse at least 14 days. It usually takes about three days to complete cleansing but the extra 11 days are added as a safety margin. Both the harvest and cleanwater areas are tested for background levels of bacteria prior to and during harvest and the product is sampled and tested before harvest and 14 days after cleansing. The testing is carried out at the Atlantic Veterinary College or Fisheries & Oceans laboratory according to a set of fixed standards. Only after the product is totally cleansed will it be allowed to be marketed.