

## **Common Eelgrass by Kathleen Sayce**

Two eelgrasses grow in local estuaries, common eelgrass and little or Japanese eelgrass. Today, I'll talk about common eelgrass. It is native to Northern Hemisphere temperate estuaries, where it grows in sandy to muddy sediments, usually from mean sea level to below low tide in the sub-tidal zone.

Eelgrasses have extensive rhizomes or roots from which narrow leaves grow; the growing point is at the base of the leaf on the rhizome, so the youngest portion of each leaf is just above the roots. Leaves naturally break away when seeds ripen on the leaves, so that the seeds float off and are dispersed by water. They also break off in fall, and wash up in large masses along beaches.

Older leaves are coated with diatoms, giving them a fuzzy appearance. Red algae live on them, forming ruffly red edges. A small green nudibranch (sea slug) grazes the leaves, eating diatoms and other epiphytes.

Brant eat eelgrass; oystermen often see Brant following oyster dredges as they pull up oysters, shedding eelgrass on the surface. Mallards, American Widgeon and Northern Pintail eat the decaying leaves with associated invertebrates in mid to late winter. Eelgrass compost is good for vegetable gardens. It brings numerous trace and micro-minerals to gardens, just as large kelps do. If you have access to some, compost it over winter, let the winter rain wash off the salt, and decompose it in place; add it to the growing area in spring. Your veggies will thank you!