

Ocean Vegetables for Health

by Danielle Creekson

You may be more familiar with the term seaweeds (and the first thought following that may be ugh!), yet the history of these beautiful ocean plants tells a different tale. Incredibly mineral-rich, they have been harvested for centuries and used as an important part of daily food and ceremony in many cultures around the world. In fact, at one time sea vegetable gardens were maintained in Hawaii specifically for royalty, and in Japan, kombu and nori were available to nobility only!

Because they use the sun's energy for photosynthesis, sea vegetables are considered plants. However, they do not have a land-plant's conducting tissues or root system; instead they absorb everything they need directly from the ocean around them. Probably the most ancient of foods, the composition of sea vegetables is like a mirror of the blood and body fluids of a person in good health. Our blood contains all one hundred or so minerals and trace elements that exist in the ocean. Seaweeds contain these in the most assimilable form because their minerals and elements are integrated into living plant tissue.

As a result of chemical usage and depletion of our soil by modern agricultural methods, food grown today contains fewer minerals and nutrients. Seaweeds can supply many of these missing nutrients. In fact, as a group they contain the greatest amount and broadest range of minerals of any organism and hence make superb mineral-rich foods.

On account of this unusual mineral content, they are effective in relatively small, supplementary amounts. Normally, the ideal way to use seaweed is regularly as an ingredient in meals. They have a remarkable ability to combine with other vegetables, grains and legumes to provide better utilization of protein and all other nutrients. In addition to a wealth of minerals, vitamins and amino acids, seaweeds are especially excellent sources of iodine, calcium and iron. So... Still not so sure you're ready to try them?

Take a look at just a few of the incredible benefits you can expect to get from these gifts from the sea. When compared to plants that grow on land, sea vegetables are 10 to 20 times higher in vitamins, minerals and amino acids. Hijiki (also known as hiziki), arame and wakame contain 10 times the calcium of milk; when compared to the iron available in beef, sea lettuce has 25 times more, hijiki 8 times more, wakame and other kelps four times more. Nori, familiar to most as the dark green sea vegetable sheet used at sushi bars, can pack a wallop of protein content as high as 25-50% of its dry weight—the highest of any ocean vegetable, and it is also high in vitamin A. Dulse (so commonly eaten

in the Canadian coastal area that you can find it next to the fruits and vegetables of any grocery store!) is also rich in vitamin A, as well as iron.

This should get your attention: After the explosion of the Chernobyl nuclear power plant in Russia, sea vegetable companies' sales shot up. Why? Studies have proven that the sodium alginate found in sea plants in the kelp family (kombu, sea palm, wakame, and others) can bind with radioactive strontium to pass it out of our intestinal tracts with the stool. After the Nagasaki bombing occurred, people who ate a strict macrobiotic diet—including brown rice and miso soup with sea vegetables—did not suffer from radiation poisoning, even though some were within a mile of the explosion! The high iodine content was helpful here as well: If proper amounts of natural iodine already exist in the thyroid gland, then it cannot absorb any other forms of iodine, such as radioactive iodine, a toxic pollutant.

The natural iodine in seaweeds is an easy, nontoxic way to meet the requirement of iodine in your diet. The symptoms of iodine deficiency include: chronic fatigue, apathy, dry skin, intolerance to cold, weight gain and enlargement of the thyroid (goiter). These symptoms are the same as those of thyroid hormone deficiency. Just two tablespoons of a kelp seaweed taken daily (kombu and digitata kelp are especially high in this nutrient), or a few kelp tablets, can supply all the iodine you need. And while iodine supplements can be toxic if taken in excess, there is no need to be concerned when eating your sea vegetables. Have as much as you like!

Truthfully though, bringing sea vegetables into your diet can be a bit daunting at first. The newness of texture, taste and smell even stopped a few of us veteran ocean plant chompers in the beginning! Don't be afraid to start with the one to which you are the most attracted. We veterans can tell you from experience that some of the "sea-weeds" we initially found the most difficult to make friends with, we now find the most delicious!

Be sure to pick up a sea vegetable cookbook to get you started. There are many excellent ones available, such as *The Sea Vegetable Gourmet Cookbook* and *Wildcrafter's Guide*, by Eleanor and John Lewallen.

Should you be lucky enough to live next to the ocean, their book can also help you to become personal friends with this ancient kingdom of foods, as you learn to find and harvest them yourself.

No matter how you choose to bring these wonderful plants into your diet, you will be glad you did... and your body will certainly be blessed with the addition of this ancient, nutritious food.