

Kelp *Laminariales*

What's in a name?

Kelp is a type of seaweed, its name is believed to come from the old Gaelic words, 'Calpa' or 'Cailpeach' which roughly translates as young female cow or young male horse (see folklore). As languages developed, the name changed to 'Kelpie' (in Scotland) or just 'Kelp' elsewhere. The word 'Kelp' is also a name given to the ash collected after burning different types of seaweed in the *laminariales* family.

Botany & Ecology

Seaweeds are classified according to their colour (green, brown or red) - Kelp is one of the brown species. The physical structure of seaweed is similar in many plants which grow in soil, but it is in fact an algae and like many other plants, it relies on light to photosynthesise. It does have a root system but rather than growing from sand, the roots cling to rocks by a 'holdfast' mechanism.



The need for light means that most seaweeds grow in shallower waters and rock pools, although some 'forests' of seaweed can be found in deeper waters if it's clear enough. Kelp grows swiftly and can increase in height by up to half a meter a day, growing to an average height of 50 meters.

Seaweeds, like terrestrial plants, form the basis of food chains. Kelp can be eaten by humans, used as a fertiliser, as feed for livestock, as well as used in the cosmetics and pharmaceutical industries.

Folklore

Kelp grows to great lengths and so after the tide has gone out, can become twisted to form recognisable shapes. One well known shape was that of a horse, a powerful black evil spirit which, if seen before a journey across the sea, would mean bad luck and one that would prey on humans.

This 'water spirit' appears in folklore across the Northern Hemisphere but it is not always deemed to be a negative omen.

The Scots would ceremonially pour ale and porridge into the sea and sing chants to ensure good harvests.

Sugar Kelp (*Saccharina latissimi*), is common along the Hampshire coast and was once used to forecast the weather. It was hung up outside. If it stayed dry it would be a fine day but if the humidity changed and it became damp then it was a sure sign of rain.

Folk Medicine

Raw wet seaweeds were often applied to cuts and burns to sooth the pain. Recently, Kelp has been adopted by the NHS and used as a dressing and applied to leg ulcers.

Kelp is also used to aid weight loss and is widely available over the counter. Modern herbalists prescribe specific types of seaweed to help alleviate bronchitis, acid indigestion and cystitis.

A variety of seaweeds were used in early folk medicine particularly in the poorer coastal communities. In Orkney, a concoction of seaweeds was eaten to protect people from all ills except the Black Death. Some of the more palatable seaweeds like green laver (*Ulva lactuca*), was known for its gentle laxative properties but Bladder Wrack (*Fucus vesiculosus*), is one of the more versatile forms of seaweed. It was used in Scotland to relieve arthritis. In Yorkshire, Bladder Wrack was mixed with rum and digested as a cure for bow leggedness. In Ireland, the bladders were separated and swallowed whole to cure a sore throat.

*Please note, readers should take advice from a qualified doctor or herbalist before using plants as a cure for ailments.