

Fucus vesiculosus

KELP is a seaweed. Found on the northern Atlantic and Pacific coastlines (particularly those of Norway, Scotland and North America), it has thick olive-brown to dark greenish-yellow fronds and oval air bladders.

It is also known as Black tang, Bladder fucus, Bladderwrack, Blasentang (English, German), *Blåstång* (Swedish), Cutweed, Fucus, Kelpware, Lady wrack, *Rakkolevä* (Finnish), Sea ware, Seaweed, Seawrack, Seetang, and *Tang* (German).

Warning – certain substances (including citric acid and caffeine) should not be taken internally at the same time as kelp. It should also be avoided if it is growing in a polluted environment as it can accumulate poisonous waste metals such as cadmium and strontium.

Vesiculosus is derived from Latin *vesicula* (little bladder) meaning ‘bearing small bladders’. For a very long time kelp with other seaweeds has been collected by local people for food (although authorities note today that it is not readily digestible), medicine and compost, not least the Chinese, the ancient Greeks and the Romans. It is mentioned by the Roman, Pliny the Elder (23-79), in the remaining volumes of his *Historia Naturalis*.

There are very different traditional ways of preparing varieties of kelp as a food in various cultures. The Japanese make kombu by drying, boiling and compressing the seaweed in a complicated process. Icelanders reduce this seaweed to a thick, green gruel by long boiling, and North Americans on the north-western Pacific coast peel and slice the hollow, middle ribs and pickle them.

The seaweed is an emblem of the Scottish MacNeill clan.

When in the early 19th Century iodine was isolated by distilling the *Fucus* species, commercial operations also joined in the harvesting for the following 50 years as this seaweed was the primary source for commercial iodine. The process is attributed to the French chemist, Bernard Courtois (1777-1838) who discovered iodine’s presence in kelp in 1811. (Authorities note that tangle, *Laminaria digitata*, contains ten times the amount of iodine found in kelp.)

Kelp is a valuable manure. It has been used in the Channel Islands, particularly in Jersey on new potatoes *Solanum tuberosum* (and similarly in Ireland). It has also been used for smoking bacon and fish. Years ago there used to be a flourishing kelp industry in the Hebrides. Here they have covered drying cheeses with the salty ashes, as well as using kelp as fodder for their cattle, sheep and horses. During the First World War the French showed that when used as fodder for horses the animals increased in weight and some sick horses were cured of their ailments.

The modern use of some varieties of kelp in cosmetics is not new. The Romans certainly used them to provide a red pigment in rouge, a practice perpetuated today in eastern Russia.

Today seaweed is harvested commercially for the industrial extraction of potassium salts and iodine. These are used by the pharmaceutical industry in slimming preparations (despite the difficulties that their use incurs), by the cosmetics industry in skin products and by the food industry as an ingredient in ice cream, salad dressings and puddings.

Medicinally, kelp (from several varieties) has in the past been recommended for treating thyroid disorders, skin diseases and rheumatism. It is recognized particularly today as a useful tool in combating obesity.