COLLECTING

In Florida scallops are generally found in the Panhandle, west coast, and the central area of the state. Scallops are considered coastal bivalves, meaning they live in saltwater, and are found more commonly in clear, sandy water. They live in seagrass beds, usually lying on their ventral shells. Often, they are easiest to find in borderline areas where the sand/mud distinction is low. This is because the scallops are large enough to produce enough meat to make cleaning worthwhile. This also gives them a good chance of survival because the scallops are large enough to produce "enough meat to make cleaning worthwhile."

Though not required, collecting scallops that are at least 6 inches long is recommended if you plan to eat the white scallop muscle, in many other parts of the world the entire animal is eaten. If you do plan to eat the entire scallop, you can simply break it in half, and eat the meat. You will need to boil or grill the shell after you eat the meat, and discard the shell. Be sure to wash your hands thoroughly after working with scallops.

When brought to the boat, scallops should be immediately put to salt. Scallops are quite sensitive to temperature and will quickly die if they are not put to salt. However, placing them on ice, however, makes them easier to open, because the muscle holding the shells together relaxes. A scallop, clam, or oyster can be opened when the shell is held with the hinge point toward you, the flat side of the shell up. The muscle holding the shells together is then pulled away from the interior of the shell, and the shell is split open along its hinge. The white muscle can be removed from the shell, and the meat is then ready for cooking.

RECIPE 1

FRIED SCALLOPS

Prepare an egg wash by beating 1 egg in 1/2 cup milk. Season wash to personal preference with salt and pepper. Dip scallop meats in egg wash, then coat with any prepared seafood breading or seasoned bread crumbs. Fry quickly (1–2 minutes or until golden brown) in hot, not smoking, butter in a large skillet over medium heat. Stir until opaque, golden brown, and dry. Drain on paper towels.

SIMPLY DELICIOUS SCALLOPS

Sauté 3 pounds Florida scallops in 2 tablespoons melted butter in a large skillet over medium heat. Stir until opaque, about 3 minutes. Overcooking makes the texture rubbery. Remove scallops from skillet and set aside. Wipe out skillet, then melt 1/2 cup butter over medium-low heat, add 2 cloves garlic and salt and pepper to taste. Stir for 3 minutes and add scallops. Serve immediately over prepared pasta of your choice, such as angel hair. Garnish with fresh dill and season with freshly ground pepper.

Recipe courtesy of Fresh from Florida Seafood. For more seafood recipes, visit http://www.fl-seafood.com.
The Florida bay scallop is a bivalve mollusk that lives in seagrass beds in relatively shallow water, usually 4 to 10 feet deep. At one time, scallops were reported from as far east as West Palm Beach and as far west as Pensacola. Today, populations can only be found in selected locations with expansive seagrass beds along Florida’s west coast—principally in St. Joseph Bay, the Steinhatchee area of the Big Bend, and near the Crystal and Homosassa Rivers. Healthy seagrass meadows are essential for maintaining scallop populations, so remember to practice responsible boating and avoid damaging the seagrass beds. Scallops live about one year before either dying off naturally or being eaten by humans, crabs, octopuses, or a variety of shell-crushing fish. They spawn primarily in the fall. After about a two-week period as plankton, larvae develop a small shell and settle onto seagrass blades. They continue to grow while attached to the grass blades by a mass of silk-like filaments called a byssus. They later fall from the grass blades and become free swimmers. Unlike oysters and clams, scallops are active swimmers. They click their shells together, forcing expelled water to propel them rapidly. Scallops are simultaneous hermaphrodites, able to spawn as either males or females, and very fertile. A single scallop can produce more than one million eggs per spawn.

SCALLOPING FLORIDA’S NATURE COAST

To monitor bay scallop populations in the state and maintain a plentiful breeding population, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) annually reviews the status of the scallop stock in the Gulf of Mexico. Results of surveys have continually shown that the scallop population within the Big Bend counties is key to the sustainability of the recreational harvest. The scallops along the west coast of Florida are considered groups of interconnected subpopulations, called a “metapopulation.” Some scientific studies have compared the genetics from different subpopulations, showing that the same area may be supplying larvae to other subpopulations. Over time, the core population expands and contracts on the edges, leading to variable catches from year to year. Unlike other areas where scallop populations have crashed due to overfishing, degraded water quality, and loss of critical seagrass habitat, the Big Bend supports a healthy, sustained crop almost every year. Efforts to restore scallop populations are ongoing in several areas of Florida, including the southwest region, where scallops flourished and supported a productive commercial fishery in the 1950s and 60s. Early restocking efforts attempted to determine whether it would be best to introduce cultured scallops in cages or to scatter them in a technique called free-planting. Scallops are known to be “synchronized spawners”—when one spawns, they all do. A number of adult, spawning scallops were placed in cages on bay bottoms where healthy populations previously existed. It was found that hatchery-reared scallops held in close proximity appeared to have an increased chance of successfully reproducing over natural scallops that are sparsely distributed. Future genetic studies and experimental releases in SW Florida are expected to evaluate the long-term effectiveness of using aquaculture to increase scallop populations.

LEGAL REQUIREMENTS

In Florida, commercial harvest of bay scallops is banned. In general, recreational scallopers between the ages of 16 and 65 must have a current Florida saltwater fishing license to collect scallops. There are some exceptions listed in the FWC “Florida Saltwater Recreational Fishing Regulations,” which is available in bat shops, FWC offices, or on the FWC website (http://myfwc.com). All non-residents 16 and over are required to buy a license unless they are fishing (scallop) from a for-hire vessel (guide, charter, party boat) that has a valid vessel license. The season usually runs from late June to late September (always consult the FWC website for dates of current season). Harvesting is allowed from the wadest bank of the Mexico Beach Canal (in Bay County) to the Pasco-Hernando county line near Anpeka. The bag limit is 2 gallons of whole scallops (in the shell), or 1 pint of scallop meat per person per day. In addition, no more than 10 gallons of whole scallops or 1/2 gallon of scallop meat may be possessed aboard any vessel at any time. You may harvest scallops only by hand or with a landing or dip net. Scallopers must remain in the legal scalloping area while in possession of scallops on the water, including the point where they return to land. See legal requirements about divers-down flags in equipment section. Always check current fishing regulations to ensure accuracy of open season and bag limit information.

COLLECTING

Scallops may be spotted or near the bottom of seagrass beds, usually lying on their ventral shells. Often, they are easiest to find in borderline areas where the sand/mud bottom meets the edge of the grasses. Scallops have many neon-blue eyes and may try to swim away when they see you, but do not swim fast or far. Keep collected scallops in a mesh bag, rather than in a pocket or in your swimsuit. They can pinch!

Though not required, collecting scallops that are at least 1.5 to 2 inches in size is seen as a best scalloping practice because the scallops are large enough to produce enough meat to make cleaning worthwhile. This also gives small summer scallops more time to grow and spawn in the fall.

CARE AND HANDLING

When brought to the boat, scallops should be immediately placed on ice in a cooler for the trip to shore unless you decide to clean the scallops while on the water. Scallops are quite sensitive to temperature and will quickly die if they are not kept cold. Even if kept cold, scallops will usually die shortly after being placed on ice, especially if fresh water gets into their shells. Placing them on ice, however, makes them easier to open, because the muscle holding the shells together relaxes. A scallop, clam, or oyster knife, or even a teaspoon, can be used to open the shells and cut the muscle free, discarding the shells and unwanted soft parts. Although most Floridians only eat the white scallop muscle, in many other parts of the world the entire animal is eaten. If you do plan to eat the entire scallop, it should be cooked thoroughly because many open harvest areas for scallops are not classified for harvest of other shellfish species.
This guide to recreational scalloping includes educational information about scallops and scalloping. The boat ramp and marina locator map show local water-access points in the Wakulla County/Apalachee Bay area. This map is not intended for navigational use. Channel markers may not be where shown. For navigation purposes, use only official nautical charts of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). The Wakulla County/Apalachee Bay area is featured in NOAA nautical charts 11405 and 11406. Nautical charts are normally available for sale at marine and coastal businesses throughout Florida.

Cleaning Your Shells

Be courteous of other scallopers and move your boat away from the scalloping areas first, then anchor. It’s no fun scalloping where others are cleaning their catch.

When done cleaning scallops, do not discard shells in rivers, channels, springs, or in the water at boat ramps or marinas. Shells could fill these areas, incurring costs to remove the shells and causing negative impacts on swimmers, wildlife, and navigation. Discard scallop shells out in Gulf waters, or store shells in a bag and discard at home.