

## Red Seaweed

**Red Ceramium (*Ceramium rubrum*),  
Gracilaria (*Gracilaria verrucosa*)**

**Appearance:** All are approximately 5 to 10 inches high. polysiphonia is red, branched, and bushy; red ceramium is red and branched with terminal pincers on the end of the branches; gracilaria is yellow-green to brownish-purple with coarse, rubbery branches.

**Habitat:** Tide pools, shallow coves, and eelgrass beds.

**Seasonal appearance:** All year; most abundant in the summer months.



### Description

Red seaweed can occur as large, branched plants or as bushy growths on rocks and shellfish. The name polysiphonia is Latin for "many tubes," which aptly describes the structure of the branches. Often called "mermaid's hair," polysiphonia is a bushy seaweed, growing in tufts that are yellow, pink, red, or black. The top of the seaweed has many branches and feels soft to the touch compared to the coarse, dark bottom of the plant. Red ceramium is branched, resembling polysiphonia, but has pincer-like structures at the end of each of the branches. Gracilaria is another red seaweed, although it can appear yellow green or brownish purple. It is a coarse seaweed, with rounded, rubbery branches.

### Life History and Growth

Red seaweed makes up the largest group of algae in the plant kingdom, with more species accounted for than brown and green seaweeds combined. They are almost exclusively marine plants. Although generally found in shallow waters, these seaweeds are able to withstand deep water and low-light conditions. There are many species of red seaweed in the North Atlantic and New England waters, but three species are commonly seen along the shoreline of Narragansett Bay and Rhode Island: polysiphonia, red ceramium, and gracilaria.

Polysiphonia is the most common genus of red seaweed. There are many species, but they are too similar to tell apart without a microscope. Polysiphonia occurs mainly in protected shallow waters, often attaching itself to stones, shells, and [eelgrass](#) by its holdfast.

Red ceramium will grow up to 10 inches long, often occurring in large tufts attached to just about any kind of substrate.

Gracilaria is common in quiet, shallow waters and is most abundant in the warm summer months. It is commonly found floating over muddy or sandy bay bottoms.

### Special Notes

- Many species of red seaweed are commonly harvested for food. Usually eaten raw or dried, red seaweed is used in salads, soups, and sushi.

- Gracilaria is harvested to make agar, a compound used in medical and biological research to culture bacteria and yeast. Agar is also used in the production of cosmetics and hand lotions.

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Adapted from *The Uncommon Guide to Common Life on Narragansett Bay*. Save The Bay, 1998.