

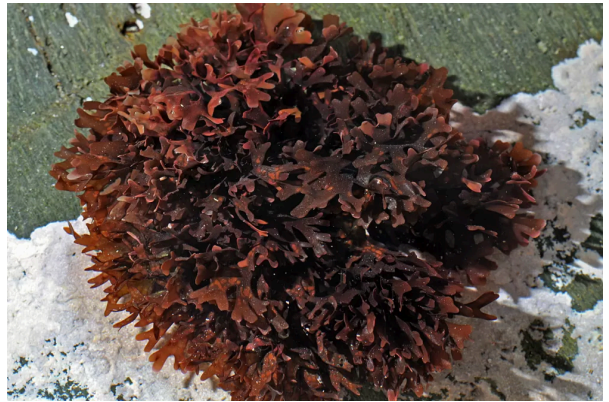
## Irish Moss (*Chondrus crispus*)

**Alternate common name:** Red Seaweed.

**Appearance:** Reddish brown seaweed with flattened blades that fork off into rounded tips. Grows 2 to 6 inches tall and 4 inches wide.

**Habitat:** Inlets, tide pools, and lower intertidal zone.

**Seasonal appearance:** All year.



### Description

Irish moss is a red seaweed with flattened blades that fork off from a short stalk to form fingers with round, blunt tips. The blades taper towards disk-shaped holdfasts, which are actually root-like anchoring structures. Typically, the blades are flat and slender. Irish moss is usually deep purplish red, but may also be white, brown, or green. When washed ashore, it will bleach to white.

### Life History and Growth

When found in shallow waters, Irish moss has blades that spread and take on a broader form. In deeper, subtidal zones, Irish moss blades are narrower. It generally grows between 2 to 6 inches high and 4 inches wide. Each blade is flat and rubbery with crimped edges. Irish moss usually grows in clumps. It can withstand extremely cold water temperatures and can survive freezing during the winter months.

Irish moss is a term used for several species of red algae. In the northern Atlantic *Chondrus crispus* claims the name while in the Caribbean it is *Eucheumatopsis isiformis*. Both contain a large amount of carrageen, a compound that thickens to a jelly when cooked. In the Caribbean, Irish moss pudding is often flavored with cinnamon and vanilla and topped with milk and rum. In Ireland and Scotland, a similar traditional pudding and milk drink is not only a tasty dessert but also a nourishing remedy for the ill.

### Special Notes

- Irish moss is found in the middle of the intertidal zone, below the rockweeds, and above the kelp. It is less slippery than other intertidal seaweeds, allowing for safer footing on rocks than rockweeds and kelp provide.
  - Irish moss is used as a thickener in soups and dairy products, and it is harvested in New England to produce an extract called carrageenan. Carrageenan is a gelatinous carbohydrate used to emulsify dairy products, baked goods, and cosmetics. It is also used to clarify beer, tan leather, and package fish and meat.
  - This plant earned the nickname Irish moss because it grows in Ireland, where it was used in cooking and as a medicine long before Europeans introduced it to Rhode Island.
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Adapted from *The Uncommon Guide to Common Life on Narragansett Bay*. Save The Bay, 1998.