

It's a shore thing

Interiors Seaweed is versatile, sustainable and can look great in the home. By *Trish Lorenz*

With its rubbery texture and distinctive salty scent, seaweed seems an unlikely ingredient to use in upmarket products, but as the search for unusual materials intensifies and sustainability issues move up the design and architectural agenda, manufacturers are reappraising its potential.

From a drinks cabinet sporting a glossy green veneer aboard a super yacht to table lamps featuring translucent seaweed shades resembling fine pale leather, the marine algae is emerging as a substance of interest in interior design.

Seaweed is now farmed commercially in many parts of the world, particularly in Asia, where it has a history of being used for architectural and design purposes. During the Yuan Dynasty in the 13th and 14th centuries, seaweed was often used as thatch for rooftops in mainland China.

Not only is it mineral-rich, but according to data published by the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation in 2011, seaweed is one of the world's most valuable aquaculture crops, with global production worth \$7.35bn annually.

This growing commercial availability has prompted both architects and designers to consider using the marine algae in their work. Israeli designer Nir Meiri is one such example. He has created a range of marine lights using seaweed. "I wanted to use an unconventional material in a domestic environment," he says. "Now that seaweed is cultivated and harvested on a commercial scale I see it as one of the materials that will be used in design in the future."

German artist and designer Julia Lohmann is perhaps the leading proponent of using seaweed in interiors. She first became interested in it during a design residency in Japan in 2007, where the algae is grown and harvested commercially for food.

"I hadn't grown up with seaweed so I didn't have the cultural blinkers that identified it as food," says Lohmann. "And because I'd created pieces with unusual materials in the past – I've worked with plastic bags, for example – I recognised it as an alternative to textiles."

She began experimenting and in 2010 founded the Department of Seaweed at London's Victoria and Albert Museum to further investigate its uses. Her work is wide ranging: she has created table lamps, bespoke screens for restaurants and a bench covered with a seaweed veneer and whose shape is inspired by the movement of kelp in the ocean.

To create the silkily tactile veneer, Lohmann collaborated with the Dresden-based artisanal manufacturer Deutsche Werkstätten Hellerau. "The veneer is lacquered and has the same qualities as wooden veneers but is much more sustainable. I'd love to see it used more widely in yacht interiors," says Lohmann.

Seaweed can certainly be employed to contemporary effect. Meiri's Marine Light is baroque and almost opulent in design. "Seaweed is translucent and has a beautiful depth of colour. It can be red, green or brown, and over



Modern Seaweed House

Helene Hoyer



► Seaweed light by Julia Lohmann, (smaller table lamps from £750), julialohmann.co.uk



► Laminarium Bench, made with seaweed veneer, from £200 per metre, julialohmann.co.uk

Ellie Laycock

time the natural colour fades and it really develops a beautiful patina of age," he says.

Design duo Glithero – formed by British designer Tim Simpson and Dutch designer Sarah van Gameren – make perhaps the most dramatic aesthetic statement using the algae. The company's hand-thrown Silverware vases each feature one type of seaweed, sometimes using several strips. To create them, Glithero harvests the material from beaches near Eastbourne, southern England, and places individual pieces on the surface of photosensitive porcelain. The designers then expose



◀ Marine Light lamp by Nir Meiri, from €1,000, nirmeiri.com

▼ Silverware vases by Glithero, from \$4,000, glithero.com

Petr Krejci



each vase in a darkroom, before immersing them in developing baths to reveal a highly detailed print.

"We have a different approach with each species, but kelp is our favourite – it's very graphic and translucent," says Simpson. "We like seaweed's contradictions, too. It has to be incredibly hardy to survive in the ocean and you can really feel that when you touch it, but it also has a real grace to it."

Lest this obsession with seaweed seems like a modern fad, it is worth noting that indigenous communities around the world – from Australia to Japan to Denmark – have used the material for centuries to create a range of objects, including baskets, thatching and even mattresses.

On Læsø, a remote island off the Danish mainland, seaweed has been part of the local vernacular architecture for almost 700 years – trees have been scarce for centuries and seaweed has always been abundant. The introduction of modern materials means only 20 traditional homes now remain on the island. Danish not-for-profit organisation Realdania Byg organised a competition to see if a modern home could be built using seaweed, which was won by the Copenhagen practice Tegnestuen Vandkunsten.

Søren Nielsen, architect and partner at Tegnestuen Vandkunsten, led the Modern Seaweed House project, which was completed on Læsø in July last year. The walls of the structure are made of wood panels, but the algae is used throughout. "Our research showed that seaweed has excellent insulating properties so we used it as insulation in the roof," he says. "We also used it as exterior cladding, partly for decorative purposes – we wanted to make the material visible and relate back to the local traditions – but also for further insulation. We used it inside, too, as a ceiling cladding and discovered that it is very good for acoustics."

Nielsen adds that seaweed is very clean because its cell structure and inherent saltiness deter mould and pests. "It's also very robust and long-lasting and doesn't absorb water. As a thatch, it can last hundreds of years. If it's dried properly, it smells like hay or freshly mown grass."

Whether seaweed catches on as a design material in the home remains to be seen. In China, where a ready supply is assured thanks to large-scale farming, some manufacturers are beginning to incorporate it into mass-produced furniture.

In Europe, where seaweed is not extensively farmed, the fragility and unreliability of natural supply remains an issue: as yet, there are still no commercial manufacturers that designers can collaborate with.