

New Pearls

With its deep white luster, the beauty of a pearl is beyond compare. Yet pearls start out as nothing more than tiny bits of matter. A grain of sand gets inside the shell of an oyster or clam. The animal then covers the sand with layers of shell-like material called mother-of-pearl. In time, a beautiful round pearl forms.

Oyster pearls are definitely the most popular pearls because of their roundness and deep white color. But other mollusks, animals with shells, also make pearls. In fact, pearls come in a wide variety of shapes, sizes, and colors. The Caribbean conch produces dazzling pink pearls. Blue, black, and yellow pearls are highly prized because they are rare.

Some pearls are valued at thousands of dollars. This price reflects how fascinating they are. It also shows how rare it is to find a natural pearl. Pearl divers discover a good pearl only once in about a thousand attempts.

But where there is a will, there is a way. Japanese pearl collectors grew tired of depending on fortune alone to find pearls. So, they invented a process to encourage oysters to make pearls faster. They deposited a particle into the body of an oyster, and in three to five years, a decent-size cultured pearl was almost sure to form.

The invention of cultured pearls opened up a new market for pearls. Previously, only very wealthy people could afford a string of natural pearls. Now, pearls are available to everyone. Each year some 500 million cultured pearls are made. They cost less than a natural pearl but are almost as attractive.

1. How are cultured pearls and natural pearls different?
2. Why are pearls more affordable now than they were in the past?