

## WHAT ARE PEARLS?

Pearls differ from other gemstones in that they're not mined from rock, but rather harvested from molluscs, especially oysters. Clams and mussels have been known to produce pearls as well. Basically, a pearl is produced when an irritant such as sand gets caught inside the oyster. To protect itself, the oyster secretes a substance akin to mucus. This substance builds up around the sand and hardens. The end result is a pearl.

Natural or South Sea pearls are those made by molluscs harvested from the ocean. Every now and then, one of the pearls will be a darker shade, either gray or black. These are rare, and as a result, very expensive.

As you can well imagine, it's a long, tedious practice to find oysters that have ingested a piece of sand to produce a pearl. The longer a pearl stays inside an oyster, the larger it becomes. Because of this, quality pearls are considered rare and cost a pretty penny. Fortunately, for those who favor this gem, there are now farms in which the irritant is deliberately injected into the mollusc to produce the pearl. These pearls are known as *cultured*.

When pearls are made without the benefit of a mollusc, they're considered *man-made*. Man-made pearls are made by using a bit of sand or shell along with a fish-based product called *hermage* to act as a substitute for the oyster's mucus. Other synthetic pearls include the "glass" pearl, a bead painted with hermage and left to dry and harden. These pearls have little or no value.

Mussels produce freshwater pearls. As their name indicates, these pearls are found in rivers and lakes rather than the ocean. Unlike the oyster, the mussel can produce many different pearls at once, sometimes as many as 40 or 50! These pearls come in various shapes and sizes.

Pearls are considered classic and elegant. They're the first choice for bridal jewellery and have a reputation of looking good with any outfit, even the most casual. They'll also add class and elegance to the most formal wardrobe. If you're considering a purchase of pearls, it's best to do some research to find the type of pearl best suiting your needs and budget.

**Remember, everyone looks good in pearls!**