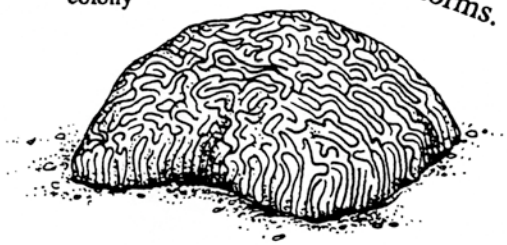
Kids Corner

star coral colonies

What does coral do?

Coral grows in warm tropical oceans. Many coral colonies grow together to form reefs that provide homes for many different animals and plants. If you visit a coral reef, you'll see a lot of colorful fishes, crabs and other animals living there. Coral reefs also protect the coast from big waves and storms.

brain coral colony



WORD SEARCH

Be careful! Some go backwards!

T	R	O	P	I	C	A	L
T	C	B	H	E	S	F	A
E	B	O	R	I	C	A	S
N	P	U	R	A	C	E	U
T	E	L	B	A	O	A	N
A	L	D	P	G	L	G	L
C	F	E	R	A	O	L	I
L	A	R	B	E	N	A	G
E	C	P	O	L	Y	P	H
S	K	R	E	E	F	S	T

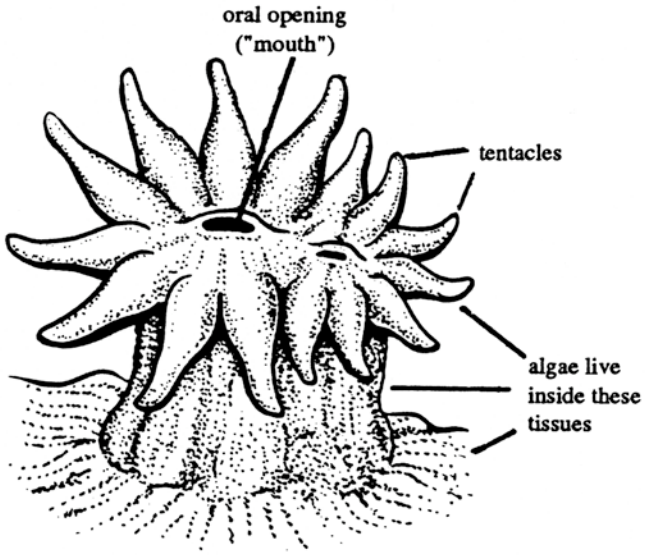
SUNLIGHT
BOULDER
ALGAE
REEFS
COLONY
TENTACLES
CORAL
TROPICAL
POLYP

Coral: Plant, Animal or Mineral?

The answer is a little bit of each. The coral tissue is a group, or *colony*, of individual coral animals living together. Individual animals are called *polyps*. Each polyp uses *tentacles* ("fingers") to catch food. Polyps share their food with each other. Since they use the tentacles to capture small bits of food from the water, corals cannot grow in dirty water. If they tried, they would get a mouth full of sand or dirt!

Living inside each animal is a type of plant called *algae* (pronounced 'al-jee). In exchange for a place to live, the algae make additional food for the coral and recycle wastes from the polyps. Like other plants, algae need sunlight to grow, so corals only grow in clear water, shallow enough to allow plenty of sunlight to reach the bottom. Most corals are found in depths less than 120 feet.

The coral colony has a hard skeleton made of limestone. The skeleton has tiny "cups" on its surface in which the polyps live. This makes the coral look like a rock and it can grow in different shapes, like large sturdy boulders or delicate branching fans. About 20 different kinds of coral grow at the Flower Gardens. Many look like huge boulders. Colonies grow about an inch every two or three years. Two Flower Gardens species are illustrated here by artist **Joel Hickerson**.



Close-up of a coral polyp in the process of budding (splitting into two polyps).