

Stylasteridae

What are the Stylasteridae?

At first glance members of the Stylasteridae appear very similar to stony corals. This is only superficial, commonly known as lace corals due to the delicately branched calcified skeletons they produce, they are actually hydrozoan corals.

Hydrozoan corals have two different polyps, both with distinct functions. A large feeding polyp or gastrozooid collects zooplankton from the water, is surrounded by many smaller polyps. These defensive polyps or dactylozooids contain the stinging cells and defend the coral from predators. The sting is so strong that some tropical Stylasteridae are known as 'fire corals'.

Where can they be found?

The dominant cold-water genera within the Stylasteridae are *Stylaster*, *Distichopora* and *Pliobothrus*. *Stylaster* species occur in many of the major oceans of the world and are often seen within octocorals gardens. *Distichopora* species are found in the Indo-west pacific, North Pacific, Galapagos Islands and the west Atlantic.

Stylaster and *Pliobothrus* are also frequently found among stony coral reefs, such as along the western slope of the Porcupine Bank and within the Denmark Strait (between Greenland and Iceland).

Hydrozoan corals

Hydrozoan corals are more closely related to jellyfish than the Scleractinia. All members of the Hydrozoa are colonial and have polyps which perform different functions.

One similarity shared with the Scleractinia is the production of a calcareous skeleton. But the skeletons are delicate and do not often grow more than a few tens of centimetres.

What are the pictures?

Images from top: Fresh growth of lace coral (*Stylaster*) attached to a boulder, Porcupine Seabight (© Ifremer & AWI, 2003). Lace corals stand out as a bright white among the various colours of an octocoral garden, Porcupine Seabight (© Ifremer & AWI, 2003). The delicate and intricate branching of a species from the genus *Stylaster*, collected from the Porcupine Seabight (© Ifremer & AWI, 2003).

This fact-sheet was downloaded from <http://www.lophelia.org> and produced for the Deep-sea Conservation for the United Kingdom Project.



**At first glance
you could be
forgiven for
mistaking the
calcified lace
corals to be
stony corals,
but they are
very different..**

