

Community Supported Agriculture: Improving Health Across Communities

What is CSA? CSA stands for "Community Supported Agriculture." It is a strategy of mutual support between farmers and local community members. Typically, a family purchases a share, with a single payment, from a farmer at the beginning of the growing season. In return, each week they will go to the farm or a designated drop-off point to pick up their "share" for the week.

What are benefits of CSA? CSA's help build relationships between farmers and consumers through mutual benefit. Farmers, who typically have small scale operations, eliminate the problem of cash flow and develop support for farming through direct association with their shareholders. Shareholders get a weekly supply of fresh food at top quality and freshness. Communities benefit because increased farm viability helps preserve open space and inhibits urban sprawl. Everyone benefits from an increased sense of connectedness and interdependence.

Do CSA's have only vegetables? Most CSA's in the United States have started around fresh produce, primarily vegetables. Some CSA's, however, operate as a group of farms, each supplying a different part of the daily diet. These are called multi-farm CSA's. One farm might provide vegetables, others fruit, meat, cheese or other dairy products, eggs, honey, or even flowers. Shareholders at some CSA's can fix an entire meal and have a beautiful bouquet on the table, all from local farms.

Are CSA's available only during the summer growing months? Not necessarily. Some vegetables can be produced through the year in unheated greenhouses. Other crops such as potatoes, onions and winter squash can be stored for distribution after the growing season has ended. Several Michigan CSA's offer shares throughout the year through a combination of these methods in the "off-season."

Are CSA's limited to rural or suburban areas? Absolutely not. CSA's are probably most prevalent where a small farm is located nearby a group of consumers interested in supporting the farm. However, there are also wonderful CSA's in urban areas. For example, Just Food has helped start more than 30 CSA's in New York City with farmers from the surrounding region.

Can CSA's work for people of varying economic means? Absolutely. For many people, paying for a full share at one time is a financial problem. Many CSA's have strategies that allow people with broadly varying incomes to participate. In some cases, community groups have developed micro-lending options to allow people below poverty level to participate.

How do we start a CSA? If you are a farmer, ask yourself: Can I deliver high quality food every week of the season? Will there be enough crop diversity? If you are a consumer, find a number of like minded people and talk with a farmer. If you don't know where to turn, contact your county MSU Extension office and the contacts listed below. Check the resources listed below for useful information.



Resources:

- Robyn Van En Center for CSA Resources <http://www.csacenter.org/>
- Just Food CSA Program <http://www.justfood.org/csa/>
- Sharing the Harvest: A Guide to Community-Supported Agriculture by Elizabeth Henderson
- The Community Farm, a quarterly newsletter for people interested in CSA <http://tcf.itgo.com/>
- Your Michigan State University County Office <http://www.msue.msu.edu/>

Contacts for further information:

- Laura DeLind, Dept. of Anthropology, MSU delind@msu.edu or (517)-355-7490
- Barbara Mutch, C. S. Mott Group for Sustainable Food Systems at MSU mutchb@msu.edu or (517)-353-3535
- Marty Heller, C. S. Mott Group for Sustainable Food Systems at MSU hellerm@msu.edu or (517)-353-3542

Written by Michael W. Hamm, Susan Smalley & Marty Heller (Michigan State University & Extension) (7/14/05)