

Community Supported Agriculture

The term “Community Supported Agriculture”, hereafter referred to as “CSA”, refers to various types of arrangements that enable consumers to buy a portion of a farm or its crops for a given season. Payment for a share of the crop is done in advance, and the crop yield is delivered gradually, as harvested. CSAs started in Japan in 1965. Housewives concerned with pesticides and overly processed foods, made arrangements with local farmers to have access to purchase their crops directly.

Learner Outcomes

The learner will:

- Look at various models for community supported agriculture
- Understand benefits enjoyed by the consumer and producer
- Examine special considerations for success as a CSA

Theory behind CSAs

Participation in a CSA offers consumers and producers certain personal, economic, ecological, and community benefits.

Benefits to the Consumer

- Access to high quality, fresh food – health benefits are well documented. Food from a known source is safer, assurance of good farm practices.
- Support sustainable agriculture
 - Support genetic diversity – produce sold fresh and local does not have to be bred for storage and shipping characteristics, can be bred for flavor and nutrition.
 - Assurance of no genetically modified crops
 - Assurance of organic growing methods – supports long term health of soils, farm systems, and ecosystems that sustain our lives
- Consumer is able to build a relationship with farm and farmer. Connection and access to local food supply is a basic human right.
- Food dollars stay local. This strengthens the local economy, which is beneficial for several reasons:
 - Fosters independence and self-determination
 - Promotes community cohesion and common vision
 - Makes community more immune to crises, less affected by economic swings.
- Local food is not shipped long distances – enormous savings on fuel cost and environmental impact of shipping

Benefits to the Farmer

- Crops can be pre-sold. Helps in making economic and field plans for the year
- No middle man, farmers get better than wholesale price for crops
- Connection to community
- Provides a model that enables small farms to compete in a market dominated by industrial agriculture.

CSA Models and Methods

- Member/Farmer relationships: The details of the member/farmer relationship vary according to the specific CSA program.
 - In some CSAs, members buy land collectively and hire a farmer to grow the crops. In this model, members split all costs and split the harvest.
 - In other CSAs, the farmer owns land, recruits members to buy portion of crops at a set share price for the upcoming season. In this model, the farmer is in charge of all crops, distribution and finances. This is the most common CSA model in the U.S.
 - Various hybrids of these two models for organizing a CSA are also possible.
- Distribution
 - Member harvest
 - Farm pick up
 - Farm stand/market pick up
 - In town pick up, often at member's home or business
 - Home delivery
- Growing the crops
 - Single farm – responsible for all crops. Organization and understanding of succession cropping is vital.
 - Cooperative – coordination of crops grown among several farms. Requires a farmer to act as coordinator. Advantage of crop specialization and reduced risk of crop failure.
- Setting the price and sizing the box
 - CSAs that operate on member owned land establish share price based on one investor's fraction of the total cost of land, labor, and materials.
 - CSAs that operate on farmer owned land can be "produce driven." In this model, the share price reflects amount of produce supplied to a member. Price per share remains same regardless of number of members. The size of box is largely pre-determined. The member is paying for what produce

they receive. What produce goes into the box is a function of what is being harvested, plus the total value of a box in a given week.

- CSAs that operate on farmer owned land can also be “need driven.” In this model, the share price is determined by dividing income that the farm needs for the season by the number of members. The more members, the lower the share cost. Box size varies more; whatever is harvested on the farm goes into the box without much emphasis on the dollar value of any given box.

Special considerations in growing for a CSA

- **Variety**

- Crop selection should be seasonally oriented. This assures that at least 8 crops are available on any given week, and insures variety in every box and over the course of the season.
- Spring/early summer - broccoli, cabbage, cauliflower, kale, lettuce and salad greens, chard, green garlic or spring onions, radish, beets, carrots, spinach, Asian greens, peas, fava beans, cherries, strawberries, etc.
- Mid-summer - above crops plus: summer squash, tomatoes, peppers, eggplant, onions, garlic, lettuce and salad greens, basil, parsley, potatoes, berries, peaches, plums, green beans, cucumber, corn, etc.
- Late summer and fall – above crops plus: winter squash, leeks, parsnips, melons, pumpkins, dry beans, apples, pears, etc.

- **Quantity**

- Quantity is an important consideration in order to assure that there is enough produce to go to all members.
- Plant proven varieties that are appropriate for farm’s climate and environment
- Proper planning – plant more than enough for all members – consider planting extra to compensate for crop losses due to weather, pests, etc.
- Succession planting – required for steady supply of several crops. For example, to have a continuous supply of an important crop like lettuce over a 20-week period, the farmer must make several successive sowings. To do this, the farmer must understand the role of light, soil temperature, ambient temperature, and all other environmental factors in raising the crop. A lettuce crop seeded on March 1 may take 75 days to reach maturity, but a crop seeded June 1 may only take 55 days.

- **Member considerations**

- Membership goal – enough to meet financial needs of farm, but not so many as to exceed farm’s productive capacity
- Members’ tastes – do they want staple items or gourmet? Standard varieties or heirlooms?

- **Impact on farm land**
 - Is the land able to support a variety of crops without sacrificing soil fertility?
 - Are crops grown appropriate for environment?

- **Adding value**
 - Aside from the fresh produce, most people join a CSA because they also desire some sort of closer connection to the farmer and the land that supplies their food.
 - Newsletters can provide regular updates on farm and CSA news. A newsletter can include interviews with producers, articles on sustainable agriculture, etc
 - Recipes can be included in produce boxes. Recipes give suggestions on storing, preparing, and eating the wealth of produce. This can include ideas about how to use unfamiliar vegetables and new ideas for old standards.
 - CSAs sometimes offer “farm days” that allow members to visit the farm, meet the farmer and crew, see fields and crops, etc.

Assessment/Review

- Describe the range of models for CSA programs.
- What benefits of a CSA program appeal to you the most as a consumer?
- What benefits of a CSA program appeal to you the most as a producer?