



Community Supported Agriculture: A Secure Market, A Local Food Supply

Community Supported Agriculture programs, known as CSAs, began in Europe and Japan as a way for urban people to rally around a local farm and secure a safe, fresh food supply for their families. Consumers hire a farmer, paying in advance for a share of the harvest. When things go well, shareholders have an overflowing abundance of local food. If the season brings drought or floods, pickings may be slim.

The CSA concept has evolved into many forms. Today CSAs are often led by farmers creating a market for their produce. The level of consumer involvement can vary tremendously. This issue of ATTRAnews looks at some unusual types of CSAs and what they offer to sustainable agriculture.

Community Supported Agriculture Grows in America

Twenty-five years ago, many young professionals left jobs in northeastern cities to revitalize abandoned New England farms. They found a dying local agricultural scene. Production of dairy, fruit, poultry, and vegetables was being squeezed out of local markets as the food industry consolidated. Direct farmer-to-consumer arrangements seemed to offer an answer. The CSA concept was born in America.

Over time, two distinct types of CSA emerged:

Shareholder CSAs (consumer-driven): A "core group" organizes subscribers and hires the farmer. The core group may be a not-for-profit organization. Land may be purchased, leased, or rented. Most key decisions are made by core group personnel.

Subscription CSAs (farmer-driven): The farmers organize the CSA, often as one of several ways they market their products. They make most of the management decisions. Farm work is not required of subscribers. Sometimes farmers cooperate to supply a variety of products for the CSA baskets. Subscription CSAs now constitute more than 75 percent of all CSAs.

Some CSAs have "add-on" options to the basic basket. Subscribers may self-harvest intensive-labor crops like snow peas and berries. In some arrangements, tree fruits and berries are available as a "fruit share." Other CSAs offer bread,

preserves, eggs, flowers, or other products to subscribers for an extra fee.

The success of any type of CSA depends on highly developed organizational and communication skills. Organizers must enjoy the complex scheduling and task management that go with CSAs. Computer literacy is a plus.



Courtesy of the Hartford Food Project

Spread the Word and Keep Members in the Loop

To find subscribers, a CSA should take advantage of free media outlets whenever possible. Promotion through health food stores and farmers' markets is a good idea. Printed brochures and flyers are not as effective as word-of-mouth in recruiting subscribers. Farmers often create a document for members, setting out expectations and procedures.

Newsletters help farmers or the core group communicate with CSA subscribers. These publications come in all stripes, from strictly business to highly entertaining and educational. A farm website keeps the community up to date with farm events.

To glimpse the possibilities, read the newsletter archives on these websites:

- Two Small Farms CSA in California (www.twosmallfarms.com)
- Holcomb Farms CSA in Connecticut (www.holcombfarmcsa.org)
- Bull Run Mountain Vegetable Farm in Virginia (www.bullrunfarm.com)
- Featherstone Farm CSA in Minnesota (featherstonefarm.com)

Much of the information in this issue of ATTRAnews is adapted from ATTRAnews's newly updated publication, Community Supported Agriculture, by NCAT Agriculture Specialist Katherine Adam.



Courtesy of the Hartford Food Project

Inside

Resources for CSA Page 2
 CSAs at the Workplace Page 3

Shareholder Dairies Page 3
 Hardin's River Mercantile Page 3

Food Bank Farm CSA..... Page 4
 Nonprofit CSAs Page 4

Resources for Community Supported Agriculture (CSA)

Robyn Van En Center for CSA

Resources maintains the National CSA Farm Directory and offers publications and technical support for farmers. Wilson College, 1015 Philadelphia Ave., Chambersburg, PA 17201, 717-264-4141 ext. 3352, www.csacenter.org

National Agricultural Library's Alternative Farming Systems

Information Center offers a comprehensive listing of resources for CSA farmers. The list is both in print and online. Contact 301-504-6559, www.nal.usda.gov/afsic/csa/csafarmer.htm

Five Springs Farm in Michigan publishes *The Community Farm*, a quarterly newsletter about community supported agriculture and family farm issues. They also organize a CSA conference and other services. www.csafarms.org

Madison Area CSA Coalition promotes CSA programs in Wisconsin for CSA farmers and consumers, too. MACSAC, 608-226-0300, www.macsac.org

Roxbury Farm in Kinderhook, New York, is a large, biodynamic CSA. The farmers have created a set of four exceptionally complete manuals that explain how the farm is run. The 2006 manuals on Crops, Equipment, Harvest, and Fertility Management are available for download at www.roxburyfarm.com

Prairieland CSA in Champaign, Illinois, maintains an active online discussion group as a network for CSA farmers. Archives go back to 2004 and beyond: www.prairienet.org/pcsa/CSA-L

ATTRA's Local Food Directories Database

Consult the many regional and national directories that now exist to help buyers find goods and growers find markets: http://attra.ncat.org/attra-pub/localfood_dir.php

Books and Publications

Sharing the Harvest: A Guide to Community Supported Agriculture by Elizabeth Henderson and Robyn Van En. Chelsea Green Publishing, 1999

Farms of Tomorrow Revisited: Community Supported Farms – Farm Supported Communities by Trauger Groh and Steven McFadden. Biodynamic Farming and Gardening Assoc., 1997.

Handbooks and guides explaining how to organize CSAs are published by Iowa State University Extension, the University of Wisconsin Center for Integrated Agricultural Systems, the Center for Sustainable Agriculture at the University of Vermont, and the Small Farm Center at the University of California, Davis.

Consultants

Cooperative Extension offers CSA support services in at least seven states: www.csacenter.org/tech/eats/index.htm

Farmers with CSA experience offer consulting services in at least 30 states: www.csacenter.org/tech/farms/index.htm

Cooking and Singing with CSA

Something Fresh Music CD and Cookbooklet

Music and food, they say, are best when fresh and local. *Something Fresh* is a delightful set of original songs celebrating fresh food and local musicians. Each song was written by a different Michigan group, inspired by a different CSA recipe. Produced by Michigan's SEEDS project, 1200 W. 11th Street, Suite 220, Traverse City, MI 49684, 231-947-0312, www.ecoseeds.org

From Asparagus to Zucchini: A Guide to Cooking Farm-Fresh Seasonal Produce

More than 400 recipes are compiled in this 3rd edition from the Madison Area CSA Coalition. \$17.50 (includes \$2.50 shipping and handling) from MACSAC, PO Box 7814, Madison, WI 53707-7814, www.macsac.org

Find a CSA or List Your Farm in these CSA Directories

Local Harvest: www.localharvest.com

NewFarm.com Farm Locator: <http://newfarm.org/farmlocator/index.php>

Biodynamic Farming and Gardening Association:

www.biodynamics.com/csa.html

ATTRA Publications about Community Supported Agriculture and Direct Marketing

These publications and many more about sustainable agriculture can be downloaded from the ATTRA website, www.attra.ncat.org, or call 800/346-9140 for a printed copy.

Community-Supported Agriculture
Organic Market Gardening:

A Start- Up Guide

Season Extension Techniques for
Market Gardeners

For a good description of many CSAs, see ATTRA's Sustainable Farming Internships & Apprenticeships Directory (online only).

Direct Marketing

Bringing Local Food to Local
Institutions: A Resource Guide for
Farm-to-School and Farm-to-
Institution Programs

Direct Marketing
Entertainment Farming and

Agri-Tourism

Farmers' Markets

Local Food Directories (online only)

Selling to Restaurants

Value-Added and Processing

Adding Value to Farm Products:

An Overview

Keys to Success in Value-Added

Agriculture

Adding Value through Sustainable

Agriculture Entrepreneurship:

Overview and Resources

See the ATTRA website for more ideas on value-added products that would be appropriate for CSAs.

Business Planning and Management

Agricultural Business Planning

Templates and Resources

Agricultural Risk Management (on CD)

Evaluating a Rural Enterprise

Market Gardening: A Start-up Guide

Moving Beyond Conventional Cash

Cropping

Enterprise Budgets and Production

Costs for Organic Production

CSA at the Workplace

North Carolina Research Triangle Park, located between Raleigh, Durham, and Chapel Hill, is the workplace of 40,000 people employed by more than 100 organizations. One of these companies, Research Triangle Institute (RTI), sponsors a community supported agriculture program for its 1,000 employees. The program was initiated by the Center for Environmental Farming Systems with funding from the Golden Leaf Foundation.

Other Research Triangle Park employees can join the CSA, but only those who work at RTI are eligible to be shareholders. Employees sign up with one or more of six farmers for:

- Organic vegetables or
- No-pesticide vegetables or
- Mixed fruit/vegetables or
- Meat, eggs, pasta, jam or
- Flowers, herbs, mushrooms

The farmers are independent operators who work with the RTI volunteer committee. Every Thursday the farmers bring the shares to a parking

lot at RTI for members to pick up. The volunteers maintain the CSA and set up weekly on-site distribution.

Before starting the program, RTI conducted an online survey of their employees and found that 92 percent thought a workplace CSA was a good idea. The survey also showed that people were interested in many different options and services, such as flexible length of season and the possibility of smaller shares for one-person households.

"The workplace CSA model can be used for approaching any group of people," said Denise Finney, a research associate with the Center for Environmental Farming Systems at North Carolina State University. She has written a new resource guide based on the RTI-CSA program: *Workplace Community Supported Agriculture: Connecting Local Farms to Local Business Employees*.

The guide includes separate sections for businesses, farmers, and



extension agents, explaining their roles in a workplace CSA. "We envision that people initiating a workplace project would be able to use this guide to get other partners on board," said Denise. The guide will be available online in June. For more information contact Denise Finney, denise_finney@ncsu.edu, 919-513-0954, www.cefs.ncsu.edu and www.rti.org/csa

Shareholder Dairies

The demand is growing for raw milk from grass-fed cows because of its superior taste and purported health benefits. Consumers are buying shares of dairy cows and contracting with the farmers to milk and care for them. This system provides consumers with the freshest possible milk and dairy products, while helping small family farms stay in business.

It is legal to sell raw milk in more than half of the states in the U.S. In Washington, micro-dairies have banded together to form the Washington Association of Shareholder Dairy Owners. The group recommends that these dairies limit production to 50 gallons a day "to maintain manageability, keep dairies small, and promote the proliferation of micro-dairies in the countryside and urban fringe." Learn more from WASDO, office@shareholderdairies.org, 509-725-0610, www.shareholderdairies.org.

Find a local dairy and learn the status of raw milk sales in each state from A Campaign for Real Milk, 202-363-4394, www.realmilk.com.



The Take it or Leave it Model

In Central California and elsewhere, farmers with roadside stands are packing boxes with a mix of the day's produce to stack near the counter. Customers can quickly dash in and purchase a box contain-

ing a week's worth of vegetables and fruit. While this is not a real CSA because there is no formal obligation, the farmers see the potential and the customers appreciate the convenience

Hardin's River Mercantile Cooperative, Little Rock, Arkansas

Buyers of a share (about \$700 in 2005) or a half-share in this cooperative can receive \$60 worth of Arkansas products every month at the Hardin's location at the Little Rock River Market. Four Arkansas meat producers who sell at the market provide antibiotic-free beef, lamb, goat, pork, and chicken for the plan – along with produce vendors and a dairy. Share fees are paid up-front to participating farmers. "If the seeds don't do well, the crop will still get paid for, and the farmer can produce something else," according to Hayden Henningsen, the River Market's produce specialist. Participants are encouraged to can or freeze part of their bounty. To learn more, visit www.naturallyarkansas.org.



Food Bank Farm Community Supported Agriculture (CSA), Hadley, Mass.

The 600-member Food Bank Farm CSA is operated on 60 acres by the nonprofit Food Bank of Western Massachusetts. Six million pounds of food is distributed yearly to 420 programs in four counties — including soup kitchens, food pantries, homeless shelters, childcare centers, and elder programs. About half the production of the farm goes to provide fresh vegetables, flowers, and fruit to Food Bank clients. The Food Bank also sponsors supplementary groceries for the elderly, a school hunger education program, and nutrition education.



Food Bank Farm provides shareholders with fresh produce from May through October, and storage vegetables in November and December, in two sizes of shares — a Farm Share for a family of three to five and a Farm Share Plus for five to seven. Some crops are U-Pick. Additional fresh local products are available on pick-up days, such as brick-oven sourdough bread, organic eggs, tofu, goat cheese, tempeh, miso, salad dressings, granola, baked goods, beef, lamb, chicken, pasta, and soap made locally by bicycle-powered equipment.

Nonprofit CSAs Create Food Security

About 10 percent of CSAs in the U.S. are operated by nonprofit organizations. Local food security programs may run CSAs as part of a comprehensive plan to ensure that all segments of the community have access to good food — through food banks, community farms, community gardening, internships, training, farmers' markets, transportation, and advocacy. Some CSAs operated

by nonprofits offer a certain number of free or reduced-price shares.

Nonprofit CSAs provide work and training for the unemployed, fresh produce for the food bank, and a venue for other local farms to sell products. In addition, the CSA offers a measure of farmland protection and insurance against sudden disruptions of the food supply in major urban areas.

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Teresa Maurer, Project Manager
Karen Van Epen, Editor
Amy Smith, Production
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— New and Updated ATTRA Publications —

- ◆ Adding Value to Farm Products (IP141)
- ◆ Alternative Nematode Control (CT 069)
- ◆ Aquaculture Enterprises: Considerations and Strategies (CT142)
- ◆ Cole Crops and Brassicas: Organic Production (IP275)
- ◆ Community Supported Agriculture (CT 090)
- ◆ Dairy Sheep (CT 138)
- ◆ Measuring and Conserving Irrigation Water (IP280)
- ◆ Pastures: Sustainable Management (IP284)
- ◆ Soil Moisture Monitoring: Low-Cost Tools and Methods (IP277)