Tips for Selling through:
CSAs — Community Supported Agriculture

CSA is a system of direct marketing where consumers pay the farmer at the beginning of the growing season for a weekly box of fresh fruits and vegetables. A CSA "share" is harvested and delivered to customers over a period of several months. CSAs may include meat, grain, flowers, or value-added products such as bread or cheese, in addition to fresh produce.

A core philosophy of the CSA model is that customers (or "members") truly support their local CSA farm by sharing the risk each season. This means that even if there's a bad harvest, the members still pay the same amount for the season. Members are willing to do this to ensure that "their" farm survives over time as a healthy food source and connection to the land for the local community. A CSA farm has the opportunity to cultivate a very loyal customer base.

For this market you can expect:
- **Lower volume of product**
- **Higher prices per unit**
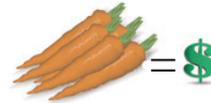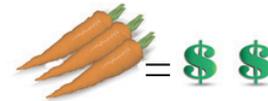
Advantages

⭐ *key point*

- Customers pay up front, which generates operating capital.
- The major marketing push is completed before the season starts, leaving more time to farm during the growing season.
- CSAs can build loyal customers who may be willing to share the risks of farming. Farmers must earn that loyalty by growing high quality products.
- No standard pack or grading is required.

Serendipity Farm. Photo: www.serendipity-organic-farm.com

Considerations

- ⭐ CSAs require thoughtful planning to maintain a continuous supply of crops.
- Packing is labor-intensive because of the wide variety in the weekly box.
- CSAs require an extensive post-harvest handling set-up for washing, sorting, packing, etc.

Tips

- Build community through efforts such as harvest parties, work days, and newsletters.
- Conduct annual surveys to get customer feedback on quality, variety and service.
- Consider collaborating with other CSA farms if you want to offer a wider selection.

Key Questions to Ask Yourself about CSAs

✪ *key point*

✪ Timing and planning are critical in a CSA. How will I ensure consistent weekly harvests of a variety of vegetables and fruits for my CSA customers?
See ATTRA's "Scheduling Vegetable Plantings for a Continuous Harvest."

● How many other CSA farms are in my area?
Do they have waiting lists—unmet demand that I could tap into?

● Will I enjoy the social aspects of running a CSA, such as hosting festive gatherings or work days for members, writing newsletters to include in weekly boxes, and generally creating opportunities for people to get to know the farm?

ATTRA Publications

● Prices vary for individual publications, many are free. An inexpensive subscription to ATTRA will give you access to all 350+ publications and databases. *www.attra.ncat.org*

   — **Market Gardening: A Start-Up Guide** (2009)

   — **Scheduling Vegetable Plantings for Continuous Harvest** (2008)

   — **Season Extension Techniques for Market Gardeners** (2005)

   — **Community Supported Agriculture** (2006)

Books and Guides

● **Sharing the Harvest: A Citizen's Guide to Community Supported Agriculture** by Elizabeth Henderson with Robin

Packing CSA boxes, Full Belly Farm, Guinda, Calif. Photo: Rex Dufour, NCAT

Van En. Chelsea Green Publishing, 2nd edition, 2007. $35. This 300-page book provides valuable insight into making CSA a viable economic model as well as an excellent arrangement for farmers and food lovers alike. It provides information on starting a CSA and how to strengthen existing CSA operations.

● **Community Supported Agriculture**. University of Nebraska–Lincoln, Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources, 2000. 4pp. *www.ianrpubs.unl.edu/epublic/pages/index.jsp?what=publicationD&publicationId=11*

● **Community Supported Agriculture** by Matt Ernst and Tim Woods. University of Kentucky College of Agriculture, New Crops Opportunity Center. 3pp. *www.uky.edu/Ag/NewCrops/marketing/csa.pdf*

CSA Software

● **Farmigo** is a computer software subscription service that provides recordkeeping and membership management. It costs 2% of gross sales from the CSA or farm. *www.farmigo.com*

● **CSA Toolbox** is an online "toolbox" that offers programs to communicate with your customers, do your paperwork, handle your billing, and take payments. *www.csatoolbox.com*

● **CSAware** is a customizable, user-friendly Community Supported Agriculture software from LocalHarvest.com designed for CSAs with lots of moving parts. The cost is 2% of sales. *www.csaware.com*

Recursos en Español

● **La Agricultura Apoyado por la Comunidad (CSA):** Una guía de entrenamiento para el ranchero de CSA nuevo o prospectivo. Producido por CSA-MI. *www.csafarms.org/downloads/csa_manual_spanishpdf.pdf*