

Defining Community Supported Agriculture

An EXCERPT from *Community Supported Agriculture (CSA): An Annotated Bibliography and Resource Guide*.

by Suzanne DeMuth
September 1993

"Since our existence is primarily dependent on farming, we cannot entrust this essential activity solely to the farming population--just 2% of Americans. As farming becomes more and more remote from the life of the average person, it becomes less and less able to provide us with clean, healthy, life-giving food or a clean, healthy, life-giving environment. A small minority of farmers, laden with debt and overburdened with responsibility, cannot possibly meet the needs of all the people. More and more people are coming to recognize this, and they are becoming ready to share agricultural responsibilities with the active farmers." (1)



Community supported agriculture (CSA) is a new idea in farming, one that has been gaining momentum since its introduction to the United States from Europe in the mid-1980s. The CSA concept originated in the 1960s in Switzerland and Japan, where consumers interested in safe food and farmers seeking stable markets for their crops joined together in economic partnerships. Today, CSA farms in the U.S., known as CSAs, currently number more than 400. Most are located near urban centers in New England, the Mid-Atlantic states, and the Great Lakes region, with growing numbers in other areas, including the West Coast.

In basic terms, CSA consists of a community of individuals who pledge support to a farm operation so that the farmland becomes, either legally or spiritually, the community's farm, with the growers and consumers providing mutual support and sharing the risks and benefits of food production. Typically, members or "share-holders" of the farm or garden pledge in advance to cover the anticipated costs of the farm operation and farmer's salary. In return, they receive shares in the farm's bounty throughout the growing season, as well as satisfaction gained from reconnecting to the land and participating directly in food production. Members also share in the risks of farming, including poor harvests due to unfavorable weather or pests. By direct sales to community members, who have provided the farmer with working capital in advance, growers receive better prices for their crops, gain some financial security, and are relieved of much of the burden of marketing.

Although CSAs take many forms, all have at their center a shared commitment to building a more local and equitable agricultural system, one that allows growers to focus on land stewardship and still maintain productive and profitable small farms. As stated by [Robyn Van En \[1948-1997\]](#), a leading CSA advocate, "...the main goal...of these community supported projects is to develop participating farms to their highest ecologic potential and to develop a network that will encourage and allow other farms to become involved." (2) CSA farmers typically use organic or biodynamic farming methods, and strive to provide

fresh, high-quality foods. More people participate in the farming operation than on conventional farms, and some projects encourage members to work on the farm in exchange for a portion of the membership costs.

Most CSAs offer a diversity of vegetables, fruits, and herbs in season; some provide a full array of farm produce, including shares in eggs, meat, milk, baked goods, and even firewood. Some farms offer a single commodity, or team up with others so that members receive goods on a more nearly year-round basis. Some are dedicated to serving particular community needs, such as helping to enfranchise homeless persons. Each CSA is structured to meet the needs of the participants, so many variations exist, including the level of financial commitment and active participation by the shareholders; financing, land ownership, and legal form of the farm operation; and details of payment plans and food distribution systems.

CSA is sometimes known as "subscription farming," and the two terms have been used on occasion to convey the same basic principles. In other cases, however, use of the latter term is intended to convey philosophic and practical differences in a given farm operation. Subscription farming (or marketing) arrangements tend to emphasize the economic benefits, for the farmer as well as consumer, of a guaranteed, direct market for farm products, rather than the concept of community-building that is the basis of a true CSA. Growers typically contract directly with customers, who may be called "members," and who have agreed in advance to buy a minimum amount of produce at a fixed price, but who have little or no investment in the farm itself. An example of one kind of subscription farm, which predates the first CSAs in this country, is the clientele membership club. According to this plan, which was promoted by Booker Whatley in the early 1980's, a grower could maintain small farm profits by selling low cost memberships to customers who then were allowed to harvest crops at below-market prices.

(1) Trauger M. Groh and Steven S.H. McFadden, *Farms of Tomorrow. Community Supported Farms, Farm Supported Communities*. Kimberton, PA: Bio-Dynamic Farming and Gardening Association, 1990. p. 6

(2) Robyn Van En, *Basic Formula to Create Community Supported Agriculture*. Great Barrington, MA, 1992. Summary [p. 57].

Addendum October 1999

Robyn Van En [1948-1997] co-founded CSA in the United States in 1985 and served as director of CSA North America.

See also "Eating For Your Community," by Robyn Van En. *In Context*, Number 32, Fall 1995, Page 29. Langley, WA: Context Institute, copyright 1995.