

Community Supported Agriculture

- ♦ Does your community have a strong agricultural heritage
- ♦ Are the farms in your community threatened by encroaching development and/or fluctuating market prices?
- ♦ Would you like to help support local farms and also benefit the larger community?

What is Community Supported Agriculture?

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) programs directly link local residents and nearby farmers, eliminating "the middleman" and increasing the benefits to both the farmer and the consumer. In a CSA program, a farmer grows food for a group of local residents (called "shareholders" or "subscribers") who commit at the beginning of each year to purchase part of that farm's crop. The shareholders thus directly support a local farm and receive a low-cost weekly or monthly supply of fresh, high-quality produce. The farmers receive an initial cash investment to finance their operation and a higher percentage of each crop dollar because of direct delivery. Both parties jointly share the benefits and risks.

The CSA model was first developed in Japan in 1965 and called teikei, which translates broadly as "food with the farmer's face on it." European farmers adapted the teikei concept during the 1970s. The first U.S. CSA program was at Indian Line Farm, Massachusetts, in 1985. More than 1,000 CSA programs are operating in the United States today.

Types of CSA Programs

- ♦ **Farmer Managed:** The farmer organizes and markets a CSA program, recruiting subscribers and determining all management decisions, e.g., which crops will be grown and the frequency of deliveries.
- ♦ **Shareholder/Subscriber:** Local residents organize a CSA program and hire a farmer to grow specific crops or other products. The subscribers make most management decisions.
- ♦ **Farmer Cooperative:** Multiple farmers organize and market a CSA program. This arrangement may permit the farmers to offer a wider variety of products (e.g., fruit, eggs, meat, or milk) to their subscribers.
- ♦ **Farmer-Shareholder Cooperative:** Local residents and nearby farmers jointly own the CSA program's resources and together manage all aspects of the program.

Benefits of CSA Programs

CSA helps support and protect a regional food supply and the local economy by

- ♦ Improving consumer access to fresh, healthy agricultural products;
- ♦ Eliminating the middleman, creating opportunity for dialogue, increasing and stabilizing profits to farmers, and often reducing the costs to consumers;
- ♦ Emphasizing biodiversity and good stewardship practices by sustaining farms that produce a wide range of crops.

How to Start a CSA Program

1. Talk to your neighbors! Are local farmers struggling? Is there an interest in increasing the quality, variety, and value in locally available food products? Talk to local residents and farmers about establishing a CSA program. Surveys and interviews are used to gather information about the produce preferred by potential shareholders and the restrictions of soil and climate variations. CSA can easily adapt and expand to target local issues and address area needs. Grower experience should be considered, because CSA programs can require knowledge sufficient to grow 40 or more crops in succession, daily yielding seven or more different items over the course of a growing season.

2. Determine the initial focus for the CSA program and its short- and long-term goals. What products are local residents and farmers interested in purchasing and producing in the CSA? Is the community focus more on preservation of agricultural land or on the development of a commercially competitive agricultural base? The scale of production, the potential number of shareholders, and the number of farmers involved are important considerations.

3. Build partnerships and design the program. With extensive community discussion and the involvement of interested parties, the CSA program can develop a "core group" of members to establish the program's formal parameters. Once the program framework and its core membership are developed, program needs should be reviewed, including capital outlays, delivery networks, communication methods, and publicity.

4. Get the word out! Marketing is key to a successful CSA program. Fairs, association gatherings, notices in local retail stores, public meetings, and livestock auctions are all excellent methods of establishing the CSA program's visibility within the community. Local newspapers can also provide publicity (in addition to paid advertising) with occasional program coverage. Finally, program members and local farmers may also provide invaluable "word-of-mouth" publicity as well as access to nearby resources.

5. Encourage ongoing discussion and adapt accordingly over time. Determining what does and doesn't work is partly a matter of planning and experience. Starting small and expanding slowly is one way to reduce program risks while continuing to raise the program's visibility in the community. Shareholder numbers may increase or decrease, product availability may change, or delivery schedules may need

updating. The program design should enable both shareholders and farmers to adapt to the changing needs and challenges they face.

Additional Resources

Sharing the Harvest: A Guide to Community Supported Agriculture by Elizabeth Henderson. White River Junction: Chelsea Green Publishing. (800) 639-4099.

The USDA Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) Program. <http://www.sare.org>

Appropriate Technology Transfer for Rural Areas (ATTRA). PO Box 3657, Fayetteville, AR 72702, (800) 346-9140 <http://attra.ncat.org>

The Rebirth of the Small Family Farm: A Handbook for Starting a Successful Organic Farm Based on the Community Supported Agriculture Concept by Bob Gregson and Bonnie Gregson. Vashon Island: IMF Associates, PO Box 2542, Vashon Island, WA 98070

Additional copies of this Technote are available from the Office of Community Development, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Rural Development, Room 266, 300 7th Street, S.W., Washington, DC 20024 (1-800-645-4712). Copies may also be obtained at

<http://www.rurdev.usda.gov/ocd>

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