



Local Food Systems for Iowa

What Is Community Supported Agriculture (CSA)?

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) is a partnership between farmers and community members working together to create a local food system.

CSA farmers produce fresh vegetables, fruits, meats, fiber, or related products directly for local community members. CSA differs from direct marketing in that members commit to a full-season price in the spring, sharing the risks of production. With this upfront support, farmers can concentrate on growing good food and caring for the land. In return, members know where their food comes from and how it is grown; they share a connection to the land and the farmers who feed them. CSA establishes a direct economic and social link between farmers and community members.

The abbreviation CSA refers to both the CSA movement in general and to individual CSA farms or multi-farm efforts.

The History of CSA

Here in Iowa, we have some of the best soils in the world and a good

climate for growing crops. Yet we import more than 80 percent of our food, most of it traveling more than 1,000 miles. Agriculture in Iowa has moved away from community-based, diversified farms toward an industrial food system. Our rural communities suffer as fewer and fewer family farmers make their living from the land.

I feel like I have the power to help change the economic picture in Iowa in addition to enjoying good food... We became members because we enjoy fresh vegetables and because we really believe in the philosophies behind CSA.

—Iowa CSA Member

Community Supported Agriculture emerged in several European countries in the early 1970s in response to similar trends.

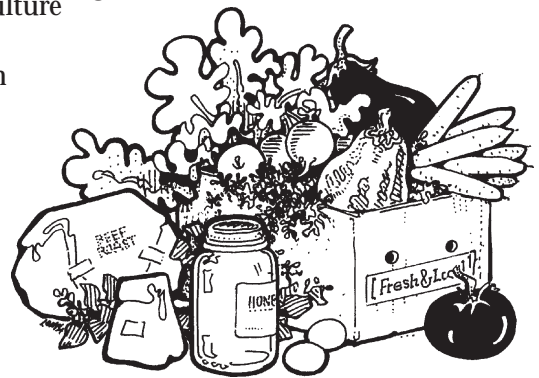
In 1986, two farms in the eastern United States began practicing Community Supported Agriculture. Now, the number of CSA projects in the United States has

grown to more than 1,200. CSA creates local food systems that support family farms, provide fresh food, and establish a sense of community and land stewardship.

The CSA model is now working in Iowa. Three CSA projects began in 1995; the number grew to twenty-five in 1998, involving more than forty farms across the state.

How Does CSA Work?

Each CSA is designed to meet the needs of producers and community members. Some CSAs have one producer; others have several. In CSAs across the United States, the number of members ranges from fewer than 20 to more than 700. Most CSAs produce vegetables; some also provide honey, herbs, flowers, baked goods, eggs, poultry, beef, pork, firewood, or even processed products such as preserves and knitted and woven goods.



In most CSAs, producers and/or organizing members plan a budget that includes production, salary, distribution, administration, and organizational costs. They then determine how many members the CSA can support and calculate the price of a membership or share.

Community members become shareholders by paying in advance for the produce. CSA memberships may be paid in single or multi-payments. CSA memberships may range from \$150 to \$800, depending on the season length, and the variety and quantity of produce provided. The early payments provide capital up front when the need is greatest.

The farm then supplies fresh produce throughout the growing season and into the winter if a greenhouse or storage is available. Most Iowa CSAs distribute five to 20 pounds of vegetables once a week for 10 to 25 weeks. Quantities average from \$5 to \$15 worth of vegetables per week for each membership or share, feeding two to four people.

Some CSAs provide door-to-door delivery, some have central pick-up sites, and in others, members come to the farm for their vegetables and other products.

The produce harvest is divided into share amounts. The amounts may be pre-divided and boxed or distributed in bulk. A surplus or exchange table allows members to choose to take less of something they don't want and more of something they do want. In CSA, members share in the farm's bounty as well as share the risks of farming with the producer. Eating with the ebb and flow of the farm helps CSA members experience a more involved role with their food system.

I was excited about the availability of organic vegetables grown nearby and therefore fresh. It was a pleasure to be associated with people who have many of the same values that I have. My expectations were exceeded!

—Iowa CSA Member

The Members

CSA members provide up-front support for producers; in return they enjoy fresh food and a connection to the land, farmers, and people in their CSA community. Iowa members report enjoying many benefits, including

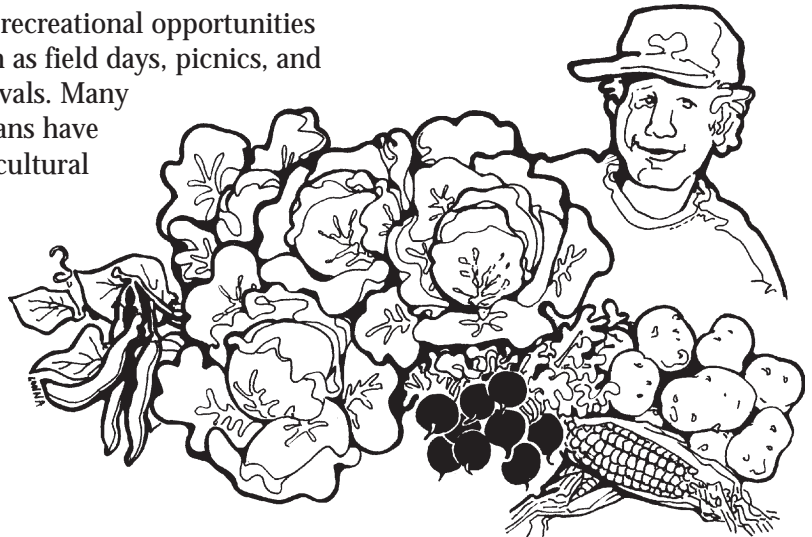
- fresh, local, often organic food grown for taste and nutrition, not for travel hardiness and long shelf-life.
- knowledge of their food's source and how it is grown or raised.
- the opportunity to support local family farmers who practice sustainable agriculture.
- access to farms for educational and recreational opportunities such as field days, picnics, and festivals. Many Iowans have agricultural

roots but today have few opportunities to spend time on farms.

- hands-on experiences with growing and harvesting, giving members an even closer connection to food production. Members even may help choose what crops will be grown.
- community outreach. CSA membership often crosses socio-economic levels, allowing everyone access to healthy food. Payment plans, working memberships, and donation memberships often are available for low-income families and food pantries.
- information about nutrition, food preparation, and food preservation provided through newsletters and workshops.

The vegetables are our weekly connection to the farm. As CSA members, we are supporting local farms and participating in sustainable agriculture.

—Iowa CSA Member



The Producers

CSA farmers develop the production plan, determine share prices, work with the members to organize the CSA, and of course, produce. Since members pay ahead of time, producers enter the growing season with an assured market.

In CSA the risks of production are shared by consumers. In a poor season, a \$30 loss for 100 families is more manageable than a \$3,000 loss for one farmer. By the same token, CSA is not a get rich type of farming. Producers provide food for a reasonable price and gain a fair living.

Rewards are more than monetary; they include guaranteed community support, a labor force in a pinch, friendship, the opportunity to educate community members, and the ability to maintain a farm life-style.

There is special care taken when you grow food for people you know.

—Iowa CSA Producer



It's very simple. People need healthy food. We can grow food for them. And people around here should be eating our food because they live right next to us.

—CSA Producer

- CSA direct-marketing from farm to table gives farmers the fairest return on their products. CSA members pay producers the whole \$1.00 for \$1.00 worth of retail broccoli.
- CSA production works for small farms, because one acre, if managed properly, can provide vegetables for 20 families for the duration of a growing season.
- CSA encourages farm diversification, supplementing income for larger farms.
- CSA involves sustainable agriculture practices. Members count on a wide variety of vegetables, which allows for crop rotation, integrated cropping, succession planting, and cover cropping. Many CSA vegetable and livestock farmers use organic production practices as well.
- CSA provides new employment opportunities. Farmers find success in CSA because of low

start-up costs. The significant need for labor in vegetable production offers seasonal opportunities for apprenticeships and youth employment.

- CSA is popular for Iowa women and men who want to earn additional income while staying on the farm and spending time with their children.
- CSA offers opportunities for cooperation among growers. Working together and sharing harvests provides an extra measure of insurance, and the producers learn directly from each other's experiences.
- CSAs conserve energy through minimal processing, packaging, and transportation. Members share the entire harvest, cutting down on food waste.
- CSAs do not replace but complement farmers' markets and grocery stores; they simply offer a different connection between farmer and consumer. Though some CSA farmers produce exclusively for their members, others maintain accounts with local restaurants or sell through conventional markets.

The Community

CSA creates a direct economic and social partnership between food producers and local community members. This form of agriculture strengthens connections between people in the community and between people and the land.

- CSA promotes a community-wide effort to buy locally, which supports farmers' markets, food co-ops, and other local businesses. Regional and local food systems keep food dollars close to home, strengthening community economies.
- CSA members and producers often work together in a core group that organizes community-building events and administers the CSA. This relationship strengthens local community ties and cooperation.
- CSA producers often use sustainable agricultural practices that do not deplete the soil or degrade water quality, ensuring a healthy environment for future generations.
- CSA organizers often sponsor farm visits and write articles that encourage Iowans to make wise choices about the future of agriculture in our state.

CSA rebuilds the close connections among food, land, and people that support sustainable food systems and healthy communities. CSA is reviving the age old process in which communities feed themselves.

—Iowa CSA Organizer

We became members to support local food production. Our family received high value for our membership in all areas. Economically and health-wise, we felt that the CSA membership improved our eating habits and lowered our grocery bills.

—Iowa CSA Member

Resources and References

Organization

Iowa Network for Community Agriculture.
Contact: Jan Libbey, 1465 120th St. Kanawha, IA 50447; (515) 495-6367. Sponsors statewide networking events and workshops and provides information about CSA.

Iowa State University Extension Publications

Iowa Community Supported Agriculture Resource Guide for Producers and Organizers (Pm-1694). Includes information and resources for organizing and producing for a CSA in Iowa. Books, reports, videos, and organizations with information on CSA and related efforts are listed. \$5 per copy.

Statewide List of Iowa CSA Farms and Organizers (Pm-1693). Current list of established and planned CSA projects. Includes items produced, number of members, addresses, and phone numbers. Single copy free.

Above publications can be ordered from county extension offices or from ISU Extension Distribution, 119 Printing and Publications, ISU, Ames, IA 50011-3171; (515) 294-5247; FAX: (515) 294-2945.



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