

# What Is Community-Supported Agriculture?

By M.E. Swisher, Rose Koenig, Jennifer Gove and James Sterns

According to the USDA, a CSA consists of a community of individuals who pledge support to a farm operation so that the farmland becomes, either legally or philosophically, the community's farm, with the growers and consumers providing mutual support and sharing the risks and benefits of food production. There are many other definitions that define a CSA. Trauger Groh and Steven McFadden, authors of *Farms of Tomorrow Revisited*, define and explain a CSA as "a community-based organization of producers and consumers. The consumers agree to provide direct, up-front support for the local growers who will produce their food. The growers agree to do their best to provide a sufficient quantity and quality of food to meet the needs and expectations of the consumers. Within this general arrangement of shared interests there is room for much variation, depending on the resources and desires of the participants. Elizabeth Henderson, author of *Sharing the Harvest*, explains a CSA as "a connection between a nearby farmer and the people who eat the food that the farmer produces." Robyn Van En summed it up as "food producers + food consumers + annual commitment to one another = CSA and untold possibilities." The Sustainable Agriculture Network defines CSA as "a more organized and defined form of subscription marketing in which consumer-members invest in the farm operation by paying up-front for the harvest. They share in many of the risks of crop failure, but also share the bounty of a good year."

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## Different from Subscription Farming?

CSAs are different from subscription farms. Subscription farms ask their consumers to pay for their produce up-front, before the produce is harvested and delivered. In subscription farming, the producer owes the consumer for what they have paid for in advance. For example, if the consumer pays for one month of produce, the producer owes the consumer one month's worth of produce. If a freeze occurs and the producer can only supply the consumer with three weeks worth of produce, they still owe the consumer one week's worth of produce. This is different from a CSA where the consumer takes a gamble when purchasing a share. If the same freeze affects a CSA, the consumer of the CSA is just out of luck.

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## A Little History

The CSA movement began in Japan and Europe. CSAs were introduced in the United States in 1986. Currently, there are approximately 1000 CSAs in the United States. Indian Line Farm in Massachusetts and Temple-Wilton Community Farm in New Hampshire were the first CSAs in the United States, both beginning in 1986.

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## Different Types of CSAs

There are three different types of CSAs. The first type includes a farmer who owns all of the land and equipment. The farmer does all or most of the work and members provide capital by buying a share. The second type includes a farmer who owns the land and equipment and the members provide capital and are an important part of the labor force. The third type of CSA does not include a farmer. The land and equipment are owned by the CSA—the members, who are also responsible for doing the work on the farm. "At one extreme are CSAs that require all sharers to do some work as part of their share payment. At the other are what have come to be known as 'subscription' CSAs, where the farm crew does all the work and members simply receive a box or bag of produce each week. Most CSAs range somewhere in between, with members volunteering for special work days on the farm, helping with distribution, or defraying part of their payment with 'working' shares."

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## Why do Consumers Join CSAs?

There are many reasons consumers join CSAs. One reason is that the consumer is able to get

produce that has not been shipped. The produce is grown locally, reducing the price and damage of shipping. Since the produce is grown locally, the money paid for the produce is invested in locally owned and operated farms. Another reason to join a CSA is that a consumer is able to get items that are typically unavailable in the supermarket. Consumers join CSAs to support local farmers, have access to fresh, high quality produce, access to organic or pesticide-free produce, and/or increase participation in community and environmental awareness. Not only can a CSA decrease costs for its members, it also gives consumers an inside view as to what the process of growing food really involves.

### What Should CSAs Offer?

CSAs should offer information to consumers about seasonal variations, focus on a variety of common vegetables, and fresh, high quality. You will never find two CSAs that are alike. Nearly all CSAs provide produce but they also can and often do provide other things such as cut flowers, plants, and animal products such as honey, eggs, and meat. CSAs not only offer food, they also offer an unforgettable experience. Valerie Engelman, the TerraFirma Farm CSA Coordinator, states that "For city dwellers, CSA provides a connection with nature, and a convenient, safe and reliable source for healthy, high-quality vegetables." She also says that "CSAs also teach members an understanding of farming."

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## Resources

- Alternative Farming Systems Information Center:**  
<http://nal.usda.gov/afsic>
- Biodynamic Farming and Gardening Association:**  
[www.biodynamics.com](http://www.biodynamics.com)
- Center for Sustainable Living, Robyn Van En Center:** [www.csacenter.org](http://www.csacenter.org)
- National Sustainable Agriculture Information Service:** [www.attra.org](http://www.attra.org)
- Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education:**  
[www.sare.org](http://www.sare.org)
- Southern Sustainable Agriculture Working Group:**  
[www.ssawg.org](http://www.ssawg.org)

## Publications

- The Community Farm: A Voice for Community Supported Agriculture,** [www.tcf.itgo.com](http://www.tcf.itgo.com)
- Farms of Tomorrow Revisited Community Supported Farms, Farm Supported Communities,** by Trauger Groh and Steven McFadden (Kimberton, PA: Biodynamic Farming and Gardening Association, 1997)
- From Asparagus to Zucchini: A Guide to Farm Fresh Seasonal Produce,** by the Madison Area Community Supported Agriculture Coalition
- Growing for Market: News, Advice and Resources for Market Gardeners,** [www.growingformarket.com](http://www.growingformarket.com)
- Sharing the Harvest,** by Elizabeth Henderson and Robyn Van En (White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green, 1999)