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What is a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) System?

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The large-scale farming system in North America is broken. Not only does it spit out unimaginative monoculture style produce, it requires intensive use of chemicals and water, pollutes our environment, and concentrates wealth (and jobs) in the hands of a small few.



Photo courtesy Bergdorf Brunette

One of the best ways to revitalize our agricultural system is to go back to the small-scale farming system of our ancestors. Community Support Agriculture (CSA) is a fantastic way to do so. And perhaps one of the biggest perks to a CSA is that it puts the average consumer back in touch with how their food is produced, a vitally important component of developing healthy communities that understand the origins of food and how to create nutritiously-packed diets.

What Exactly is a CSA?

It's not really a new idea. In fact, CSAs were first put into practice in the 1970s in Europe. Today, a CSA usually consists of a partnership of some kind (there are several CSA types) between farmer and local consumer. By becoming a shareholder in the farm, local residents receive low-cost, high-quality food produced by the farmer in regular installments.

Generally CSA members purchase their shares before the farm year starts and can either choose individual or multiple shares, depending on the amount of food they require. On average, a full share will cost the consumer between \$250 and \$500 per season. In certain CSAs, members are also permitted to purchase shares in only a portion of the harvest – produce only, flowers only, produce with dairy only, or produce with flowers, dairy and meat, for instance.

In return for offering affordable, healthy, locally-produced foods to neighboring residents, the farmer receives the necessary financial capital to run the farm as well as more money per pound of food than they would receive selling their wares to the local supermarket chain. The funds provided by

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the CSA members are used to pay for yearly expenses (which can help the farmer avoid debt), the farmer's salary, and to manage the program.

In many ways, by choosing this partnership method, a local farm becomes, either legally or symbolically, an agricultural system owned by the community. As such, there are mutual benefits and mutual risks in a CSA arrangement. If the farm produces a smaller harvest than anticipated, shareholders receive less food (or none at all) throughout the season. If, on the other hand, the farm produces a bumper crop, CSA members enjoy the bounty along with the farmer.

How Does a CSA Work?

Food from the CSA is often packaged into food bins prepared by the farmer that are either delivered or picked-up by the shareholders weekly or monthly. Some CSAs also have drop-off locations scattered throughout the city, thereby minimizing the number of trips by consumers to pick-up food from a remote farm.



Photo courtesy Waldo Jaquith

CSA boxes can contain a wide range of things, including fruits, vegetables, eggs, dairy, preserves, baked goods, flowers, proteins, and more. One of the main draws of supporting a CSA is the seasonal produce available – what's produced at the farm generally changes throughout the year, allowing home cooks to create meals on the earth's schedule.

There are other benefits to supporting CSAs, including environmental ones. Of course, there are the obvious benefits of eating foods produced closer to home – lower food miles and therefore a smaller greenhouse gas emissions footprint. But beyond that, many CSA farmers place increased emphasis on using heritage or heirloom strains of foods, while using organic or biodynamic methods. This further benefits the planet by limiting chemical infusions, minimizing water consumption, and even sequestering carbon (good for climate change). If you're looking to find a CSA in your neighborhood, check out Ecovian's CSA listings.

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