

Information Sheet

COMMUNITY SUPPORTED AGRICULTURE

Many people today are expressing increasing concern about the future of our planet. Issues causing concern are many and varied but include environmental degradation, genetically engineered crops, pesticide use and future shortages of water and crude oil. Other areas of concern in most first-world countries are the urbanization of agricultural land and the collapse of rural farming communities caused by the globalization of food production by large multi-national companies. These concerns have created increasing interest in an alternative system of food production and distribution known as Community Supported Agriculture.

What is Community Supported Agriculture?

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) is an alternative socio-economic model of food production and distribution. It is a concept that encourages local, environmentally sustainable food production, and supports both farmers and consumers alike. CSA began in the 1960s in Germany, Switzerland and Japan as a response to concerns about food safety and the urbanization of agricultural land. At that time groups of consumers and farmers in Europe formed cooperative partnerships to fund farming and pay the full costs of ecologically sound and socially equitable agriculture. In 1965 mothers in Japan who were concerned about the rise of imported food and the loss of arable land started CSA projects called *Teikei* (提携). In Japanese *Teikei* means “put the farmers’ face on food”. CSA projects started to appear in the United States in 1984.

While there are many variations on the CSA theme, the basic concept remains the same. A local farmer contracts with a group of consumers (the CSA group) to provide them with an agreed nominal quantity and variety of freshly grown food (usually organically grown) for the entire season. The actual quantity and variety delivered may however be affected by growing conditions on the farm. In this way the CSA group pledges to support the farmer during the season and the farmer and consumers share the risks and benefits of food production.

CSA groups are usually provided with weekly deliveries of freshly grown vegetables and fruit. In some cases dairy products, meat, preserves, herbs and flowers may also be provided. Members usually pay for their food in advance, before the season commences. This ensures that the farmer has a reliable income at planting time when it is needed most. In some schemes however, payment is made weekly when the food is delivered. In these cases, the farmer bears the costs of planting but still retains the advantage of a known, guaranteed income during the harvest season.

CSA members are usually kept involved in the farm’s activities with field days, newsletters and open invitations to visit the farm. In this way, CSA schemes closely connect consumers with the story of their food, including both the farmers who grow it and the environment in which it is produced.

Usually a CSA scheme has one producer, but it is not uncommon to have several farmers involved. There are over 1000 CSA enterprises in the USA and numbers of customers vary between 10 and 700. In Australia the concept is not as well known, and only a few CSA groups exist.

The benefits of Community Supported Agriculture

Farmers, consumers and the environment can all benefit in a number of ways from the expansion of CSA initiatives:-

Benefits for the Farmer

- CSA schemes ensure a reliable income for farmers. This is usually received at planting time, when it is needed most, rather than at harvest time.
- Farmers receive a greater proportion of the final price of the food they produce. The “middle-men” are cut out of the food chain.
- CSA schemes ensure farmers will have a market for their produce, as shareholders commit to membership for the season. This means that less effort is needed to market the produce, and farmers can spend more time on farm management, helping to ensure the long-term sustainability of the farming system.
- All members of a CSA share the risks of food production equally, and this connection helps build meaningful connections and understandings between farmers and the people who benefit from their work.

Benefits for the Environment

- By supporting the preservation of small and bio-diverse farms, CSA schemes cultivate rich and diverse communities.
- The continuance of such small-scale farms, particularly near metropolitan areas, can also protect the loss of farm land to urban sprawl.
- By connecting consumers with producers in their local area, CSA schemes can also reduce the resources wasted in marketing, packaging, storing and transporting produce, thereby reducing pollution and energy associated with the production and distribution of food.

Benefits for the Consumer

- Consumers benefit by gaining access to freshly picked, quality, seasonal produce which is usually organically grown.
- The cost to consumers is generally lower than equivalent produce purchased in a shop.
- The relationship between farmers and members cultivated within a CSA group enables shareholders to know where their food comes from and how it is grown, and by re-establishing the connections between people and the land.

Summary

Community supported agriculture represents a real and viable alternative to global industrial model which is common today. CSA initiatives are enabling local communities and environments to flourish, creating healthy and safe places for people to live and work. Farmers and consumers worldwide are taking the lead in developing these local food networks. In doing this, they are creating the path towards socially just and environmentally responsible food systems.

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