

CSA Fact Sheet

What is a CSA? Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) is one way for consumers to gain access to locally grown food direct from the farmer. When CSAs were originally developed in the United States more than 20 years ago, they provided a market for produce and a way for farmers to share the “ethos” of farming with interested consumers. The farmers gained much needed capital at the beginning of the growing season, and consumers received fresh, locally grown produce each week. CSAs vary greatly in terms of distribution, cost, consumer involvement at the farm, etc.

How do CSAs work? A farmer offers a certain number of "shares" to the public. Typically the share consists of a box of vegetables, but other farm products such as fruit, eggs, dairy and even meat may be included. Interested consumers purchase a share (or subscription) and in return receive a delivery of seasonal produce each week, or every other week, throughout the farming season. Deliveries are made to designated locations at consistent times. In Wisconsin, the main growing season is about 20 weeks, June-October and full weekly shares cost approximately \$550-\$650.

Benefits to Consumers:

- Purchase food usually harvested within hours, or a day or two, of delivery, with increased flavor and vitamins
- Get exposed to new vegetables and new ways of cooking
- Usually consumers are encouraged to visit the farm at least once a season – you get to see how and where your food is grown – a benefit in times of food safety concerns
- Children favor food from "their" farm – even veggies they've never been known to eat
- Develop a relationship with the farmer who is often a part of the community
- Members' expenses may decrease – the fresh food compels them to use it – thus families may eat out less while consuming more fresh produce
- Many people report better health – feeling better, losing weight, having more energy – as they consume more fresh food
- CSA members buy their food directly from a local farmer employing local workers, instead of paying distributors and trucking companies, so their dollars remain in their local communities

Benefits to farmers:

- Get to spend time marketing the food early in the year, before field season begins
- Receive payment early in the season, which helps with cash flow
- Have an opportunity to get to know the people who eat the food they grow
- Helps farmers stay in business during hard times
- CSA farms grow diverse crops instead of mono-crops; that diversity can be better for the land
- Preserves small family farms

Shared Risk

Shared risk is an important concept of the CSA model. Some CSA farms stress this more than others, and CSA members may be asked to sign a policy form indicating that they agree to accept certain conditions without complaint. Most CSA farmers feel a great sense of responsibility to their members, and when crops are scarce, they prioritize the CSA shareholders. Still, things occasionally are out of the farmers' control, for example, flooding. Fortunately, natural disasters are infrequent.

Statistics:

- Tens of thousands of families have joined CSAs nationwide
- Currently, there is more demand for CSAs than there are farmers nationwide; in Wisconsin, there are more than 250 CSA farms
- 2007 USDA data indicates that there are 12,549 farms in the US marketing through a CSA model – 437 of them are in Wisconsin
- There are many variations of CSAs including “market style”, food bank models, specific commodity shares, (i.e. fruit, bakery, eggs, meat, dairy etc.)
- Non-farming third parties are setting up CSA-like businesses, where they act as middle men and sell boxes of local (and sometimes non-local) food to their members – beware!
- Most supermarket produce is picked 4 to 7 days before being placed on grocery shelves, and is shipped for an average of 1,500 miles
- Only 18 cents of every dollar, when buying at a large supermarket, goes to the grower. 82 cents go to middlemen. When you purchase a CSA share, your farmer gets close to the full retail value of his or her produce.
- Most CSA members have really good experiences. 1,280 members of the almost 4000 CSA's listed on LocalHarvest.com have written 2,895 reviews describing their experiences. Of these, there are 211 reviews (of 120 farms) that gave their farm one or two stars (out of five). Writers of the remaining 2,684 reviews gave their CSA four or five stars
- FairShare CSA Coalition, a non-profit organization in its 22nd year, features 49 CSA farms in 2014 that are certified organic or in transition to certified organic
- FairShare CSA Coalition has grown from 8 farms producing 175 shares in 1992 to 49 farms producing more than 9,500 shares
- FairShare farmers feed approximately 25,000 people their fresh seasonal

~ Adapted from a CSA fact sheet created by Cornell University Cooperative Extension