

## Community Supported Agriculture

### *Introduction*

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) is a partnership between a farmer or farmers, and a community of member share holders. The members commit to supporting the farm financially by purchasing “shares” of the farm products in advance of the growing season, thereby assuming some of the costs and risks along with the grower. Some CSA’s also have a component wherein shareholders actively participate in the operations of the farm. (Miles, A. and Brown, M. 2005)

### *History*

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) organizational structures appear to have arisen separately in two disparate locations, Japan and Europe. After World War II, Japan began to see a shift away from long standing agriculture practices that had sustained communities and farmers for several thousand years. Consumers, usually women, became concerned about the increasing use of pesticides as well as the loss of community that occurred as individuals left the country side and moved to the city. In the early 1970’s, these consumers began to develop food purchasing cooperatives that purchased produce directly from local, organic farmers. Eventually farmers, faced with the increasing demands of the consumer cooperatives, joined together and formed cooperatives. (Henderson, 1999). These consumer/farmer relationships became known as “*teikei*” variously translated as “face to face”, or “putting the farmers face on food”. (Miles, A. and Brown, M. 2005)

The roots of what became the CSA movement in Europe stretch further back, to the work of Dr. Rudolph Steiner. During the early 1900’s, Dr. Steiner became well known as a philosopher, theologian, scientist, and economic theorist. Dr. Steiner lectured widely on a variety of topics including medicine, education, theology, economic systems and biodynamic farming.

By the 1970’s, Dr. Steiner’s philosophical principles in the areas of associative economics and biodynamic gardening had come together to create new forms of farmer/consumer relationships. In the mid-1980’s, two individuals influenced by Steiner’s teachings brought the concept of community supported agriculture to the United States, Trauger Groh and Jan Vander Tuin.

In 1968, Groh had been instrumental in the development of a land trust in Germany that held title to lands that would be used for biodynamic farming into perpetuity. The Trust had further goals of protecting agricultural lands from development, and encouraging cooperative and equitable partnerships between landowners and growers. Later, Groh was also involved in the development of an “Agriculturally Cooperating Community”, a network of community members who supported farmers by providing loans to them. Groh then ventured to the United States where he became involved in the development of Temple-Wilton

Community Farm in 1986. (Miles, A. and Brown, M, 2005) Temple-Wilton was organized according to the model we now know as Community Supported Agriculture. Currently, Temple-Wilton is a CSA providing bio-dynamically grown fruits, vegetables and other products to share holders in New Hampshire. (Temple Wilton Community Farm web site.)

Another adherent of Dr. Steiner's philosophies, Jan Vander Tuin, introduced the idea of community supported agriculture to Robyn Van En at Indian Line Farm in Massachusetts in 1985. Van En, Vander Tuin and several others began a small CSA with an apple orchard operation. Soon an additional farmer joined them to offer shares in vegetables. The Indian Line CSA delivered shares to 30 members in 1986 and grew to over 150 members in four years. Though the Indian Line Farm CSA did not survive, Robyn Van En remained committed to the concept of CSA and went on to become a leader in the expansion of the CSA movement. (Henderson, 1999)

Since the 1980's the number of CSA's in the United States has continued to grow. Some estimates are as high as 1200, with CSA's in every region of the United States.

The first CSA in California was begun at the Live Power Community in Round Valley. Like the original American CSA's, Live Power Community Farms roots are in the teachings of Steiner. It is an organic, biodynamic farm whose mission is to "create a completely self-sufficient agricultural community where humans learn to feed the soil as much as the soil feeds them". It serves 200 shareholders in San Francisco and various locations in Mendocino County. (Live Power Farm)

### *Philosophy*

Community Supported Agriculture is based in a philosophy that links the consumer and the farmer in an interdependent relationship. This relationship is beneficial to the farmer, the consumer, and the community in which they live and farm.

The philosophical underpinnings of Community Supported meet farmers needs in several respects. CSA's allow farmers to function at a more human scale, allowing small and mid-size farms to remain viable in an age of large, industrially oriented farms. Additionally, the CSA organizational structure allows the farmer to share the risks inherent in farming in a poor year, and the bounty of a good year, with the consumer.

From the consumer's perspective, CSA's create a more intimate connection with the source of their food than can be found at a corporate supermarket. CSA membership increases the shareholders contact with agriculture and thereby increases their appreciation for farming, and for farmland in their community. Through participation in the CSA, members also became aware of the seasonal

nature of food production and are able to develop a personal relationship with the individuals that grow their food.

For many, community development is the most important aspect of Community Supported Agriculture. Involvement in a CSA may encourage individuals to form a community made up of the CSA membership, as well to develop a greater awareness of the community surrounding them. Many CSA's participate in programs that contribute to social justice and equity within their larger communities. These programs range from offering reduced cost shares to low-income families to donating surplus produce to anti-hunger initiatives. (Miles, A. and Brown, M. 2005)

From the environmental perspective, CSA farmers generally practice sustainable farming methods. Many are certified Organic or Biodynamic, or both. These sustainable farming practices contribute to the long term health and well being of the ecological community in which the members and farmers live.

#### *Organizational Structure and Function of CSA's*

Today's CSA's generally fall in to one of two types of organizational structure; farmer run and community run.

Currently CSA's owned and run by the farmer(s) is the most common. The farmer controls the production system and manages all aspects of the farm including marketing, production, billing, etc.

Within the Farmer Run structure there are many variations in the level of participation of the members. Some CSA's offer extensive opportunities for members to share an on-the farm experience. Members may be involved in weeding, picking, and/or packing or other daily farm activities, enhancing their sense of connectedness to the farm, to agricultural practices, and to the farmer.

Other CSA's operate more as a subscription service and place less of an emphasis on the agricultural participation component. Members may have limited opportunities to for first hand experience in the cycles of farm life. Often, this is due to the geographic distance between the farm and the consumers.

A second organizational structure is community run CSA's. Often these CSA's are initiated by a group of individuals, called a core group, which selects a grower to produce crops. The responsibilities of the core group may range from simply coordinating distribution and outreach, to managing the day to day operations of the business aspects of the farm.

#### *Products and Services*

CSAs today offer a variety of products and services to their members. Most include a range of sustainability grown vegetables over the growing season of the region in which they operate. Some also offer fruits, meats, cheese, flowers,

bread, grains, etc. These items may be offered as regular fare in the Members share box, or the Member have the option of adding them at an additional cost. Some CSAs have cooperative relationships with other farmers, or even other CSA's to provide these goods. Some produce them directly on the farm.

### *Community Supported Agriculture as a Marketing System*

One study of CSA's as a marketing system showed a 34% increase in revenue in a CSA system over selling to an organic vegetable wholesaler. (Sabih, S.F. and Baker, L.B.B. 2000). According to the study, this increase in revenue occurred for a number of reasons. CSA's generally require members to pay for their shares at the beginning of the season. This provides much needed capital for the acquisition of seeds and other inputs purchased at the beginning of the growing season, allowing the farmer to forgo debt financing. (Sabih, S.F. and Baker, L.B.B. 2000). CSA's also guarantee a fixed price for the farmer's products, unlike the wholesale market where prices may fluctuate widely during the season. (Sustainable Agriculture Publications)

Additionally, in a CSA organizational system the farmer knows in advance how many shares of produce have been purchased. This allows the farmer to create planting schedules, crop rotations, harvest schedules, etc. for a known market, rather than having to speculate about what might sell, in what volume, to whom, etc. (Sustainable Agriculture Productions).

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