



community-supported agriculture



what is it?

Community-supported agriculture (CSA) has no standard definition (like organic standards, for example), but is a model of food production that allows local communities to share the risks and rewards of farming. A CSA group can be farmer-led - local people invest in a farm or smallholding, and receive a share of the produce; or it could be consumer-led, where local people source a piece of land and produce food themselves.

The roots of CSAs may well lie in a Japanese co-op called the 'Seikatsu Club' that began purchasing foodstuffs from as local and sustainable sources as possible in 1965, and went on to own its own farms. Similar groups appeared in Japan in the 1970s, and in the US in the 1980s, where the term CSA was coined (now around 13k CSA farms in the US).

CSAs are not always local. In large cities, food may be brought in from selected farms elsewhere in the country - as close to the city as possible, to provide an alternative to unseasonal food flown from the other side of the world. In the US, CSAs tend to be less 'hands-on' than in the UK for example, where members are encouraged to help with food production. In the States, the relationship with food producers tends to be more monetary than physical, although of course this is still a great help for farmers.

There are also hybrid groups that have a core membership involved with the land / food production and other members that have more of a monetary relationship with the food producers.

CSA is mainly about fruit and veg, but can also include eggs, honey, bread, meat, firewood or even fish.



This CSA farm in Suffolk produces honey from natural top bar hives.



CSA members harvesting carrots.

what are the benefits?

For food producers

- CSA schemes provide a regular income and better cash flow for farmers, so that they can plan more effectively; plus they can sort out their finances early in the season before the demanding work schedule starts in the summer and autumn.
- Risks such as crop failure or livestock disease are shared with the community, in exchange for a supply of local, wholesome food.
- They might get a bit of extra voluntary labour too.

For local people

- Better food; and often cost effective when compared to supermarkets (which of course have none of the benefits mentioned here).
- Community cohesion: local people getting to know each other; more money stays in the local community, rather than being sucked out to pay shareholders elsewhere.
- People becoming more engaged in farming and growing / getting to visit farms and learn more about how food is produced / eventually maybe becoming smallholders or market gardeners themselves.
- There's also usually a very important social side - harvest festivals, parties, days out on farms with kids.
- Often, CSA schemes will offer membership in exchange for work on member farms, making it accessible for people on low incomes.

For ecology

- Lower food miles.
- Food is usually produced using organic principles, although not necessarily certified organic (which is expensive for small producers) - but they don't need to be, as locals know whether producers are organic or not.
- Less waste, as funny-shaped veg is perfectly fine, unlike for supermarkets.



For society

- It's a tool to help prise the grip of the corporate sector from our food supply.
- Government help / subsidies etc. are heavily weighted towards large-scale farming. For example, in the UK, agricultural subsidies are for farmers with at least 5 hectares. This seems to indicate that government doesn't consider small producers with less than 5 hectares 'real' farmers, and yet studies have shown that smallholdings produce more food per hectare than large farms, and so are a better way of feeding the world. CSA is a way to right this imbalance - an attempt to build a better agricultural sector.

what can I do?

Become a member of your nearest CSA scheme. Do an internet search for 'community-supported agriculture' plus your country, find your national network and through them, find your local group, if there is one; alternatively, search for CSA plus the name of your town. If there isn't a local group, well, someone has to start one. I'm sure you know a lot of likely people in your area who would be interested. You could start talking to local farmers and tell them about CSA.

There are lots of different ways that a scheme can operate. For example, Cultivate Oxford in the UK started out as a CSA, but they don't get produce. Instead they get discounts from an online shop and a delivery van in the town. There aren't really any restrictions on the specific type of group you have to be - being too prescriptive may restrict the size of the movement.



Guiding members to a CSA farm in Maryland.

However, CSA schemes are not really about farmers' markets, pick-your-own or veg box deliveries. Those are excellent models, but CSA members tend to be more involved in the whole business and promotion of local food production.

Community-led groups are often allowed to use land owned by the council to grow food, often with a one- or two-year tenure, after which the group is moved on. This isn't great, as there might have been a considerable input into the land and soil. Long-term viability of schemes can be better when farmer-led, as the land tenure is usually secure.

CSA is largely horticultural, and attracts a lot of vegetarians and vegans. We think this is a good thing. However, members sometimes threaten to leave if livestock is introduced into the scheme. This has several negative connotations: it restricts the growth of CSA; it makes it more difficult for people to get meat from CSA schemes, so they might get it from corporate sources; those sources will be more likely to involve factory farming; and it's unlikely to reduce the amount of meat eaten (and will possibly have the opposite effect). We recommend that you stick with the scheme if livestock is introduced, but continue to persuade people of the benefits of vegetarianism/veganism. That will probably be a more successful way to reduce the amount of meat eaten, and will mean that more meat that is eaten will be from sustainable, non-corporate sources.

CSA could include more than just fresh produce - for example cheeses - but this soon becomes difficult because of red tape. It's something we'd like to see challenged in future. Small producers often can't afford expensive stainless steel equipment or licences, but they tend to care more about their produce, and are not involved with the horrors of factory farming. Small doesn't mean unsafe - quite the opposite.

resources

- lowimpact.org/community-supported-agriculture for more info, links, books, including:
- E Henderson & R Van En, *Sharing the Harvest: a Citizen's Guide to CSA*
- J N Smith, *Growing a Garden City*
- Amy Cotler, *the Locavore Way*
- communitysupportedagriculture.org.uk - UK network
- localharvest.org/csa/ - find CSAs in the US
- <http://urgenci.net> - international network

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