



## Local CSAs Pick Farm Fresh Vegetables For You

**If you're a community supported agriculture (CSA) member, you get your weekly basket of just-picked vegetables and other local food—you're in luck—there's two pounds of vine-ripened tomatoes that smell like they've been picked within the last few hours.**

By Kristin Mehus-Roe

It's Wednesday night, you're tired from a long day at work and all you want is a nice, healthy meal for dinner. In fact, you'd love to sit on your porch with a glass of wine, a loaf of crusty bread, and a plate of perfectly ripe, right-off-the-vine tomatoes.

© Karen K. Acevedo

Unfortunately, you don't have a garden, you missed Sunday's farmer's market and there is no co-op in your urban neighborhood. You tear open a box of macaroni and cheese and settle in for a day-glow meal in front of the TV.

Or, if you're a community supported agriculture (CSA) member, you pull up to your house and find your weekly basket of just-picked vegetables on your porch. You're in luck, there's two pounds of vine-ripened tomatoes that smell like they've been picked within the last few hours.

In this article:  
Understand the CSA Concept  
Knowing Your Food Source  
Marketing Idea for Small Farms

You take a deep whiff, and explore the rest of your box, thankful that you signed up for the fresh bread that your CSA offers for an extra couple dollars each week. Ditto for the bouquet of flowers, which you quickly place in a vase.

© Karen K. Acevedo

Ten minutes later you're eating tomatoes and fresh basil (another bonus in your CSA basket), chewing a bite of rosemary bread and enjoying the sight of fresh flowers on the table.

Things look a little better now. There's only two days until the weekend--smooth sailing. Maybe you'll take a drive to the country and visit your CSA farm and pick strawberries for free, an amenity they offer their members. There's nothing better than a day in the country to revitalize your spirit.

**The Concept of CSA**  
According to CSA farmers and CSA members, community supported agriculture serves as a bridge between food eaters and food growers.

"CSAs are becoming the connection between the public and the family farm: part of the food system renaissance," says farmer Judith Redmond of Full Belly Farm in Guinda, Calif.

The concept behind Community Supported Agriculture is simple. Members purchase a share of the harvest in advance. Then, they receive a weekly basket of fresh produce throughout that farm's growing season.

Some CSAs offer shares of harvests year round, while others only offer shares through the prime growing season: late



spring, summer and early fall. Many offer a standard season, usually around 22 weeks, with an extended season share available for an additional fee.

Ryan Voiland, owner of Red Fire Farm in Granby, Mass., offers a 17-week season and then an additional 12-week winter season.

"We encourage everyone to do an entire season but some people get sick of root crops," he says with a laugh, adding that the winter season also offers greenhouse-grown produce, as well as cabbage and sprouts.

#### Making a CSA Connection

Many CSAs are now hooked up to the Internet. To find a CSA that serves your region, or for information on starting your own CSA, explore a few of the following groups:

#### Community Supported Agriculture of North America

This site, operated by the University of Massachusetts Extension provides information on the history and philosophy behind CSAs, as well as links to CSA resources.

[www.umass.edu/umext/csa/](http://www.umass.edu/umext/csa/)

#### Robyn Van En Center for CSA Resources

Everything you ever wanted to know about CSAs is right here on this website operated by Wilson College in Pennsylvania.

[www.csacenter.org](http://www.csacenter.org)

#### Alternative Farming Systems Information Center

This site, partially funded by the USDA, provides information on all types of alternative farming, including organic, sustainable agriculture and community supported agriculture.

[www.nal.usda.gov/afsic/](http://www.nal.usda.gov/afsic/)

#### Community Alliance with Family Farmers

This California site provides plenty of farm links for those interested in joining or starting a CSA in California.

<http://caff.oceangroup.com>

#### Growing for Market

This is a great source for farms that grow for direct markets, such as CSAs, farm stands and farmer's markets. It also provides links to direct farm websites around the country.

[www.growingformarket.com](http://www.growingformarket.com)

#### Red Fire Farm

Ryan Voiland's Red Fire Farm operates two CSAs and several farm stands in Granby, Mass.

<http://redfirefarm.homestead.com/files/index.htm>

#### Full Belly Farm

Judith Redmond's Full Belly Farm website provides information to CSA members about current basket contents, pick-up sites and CSA shares.

[www.geocities.com/fullbellycsa/](http://www.geocities.com/fullbellycsa/)

#### The Food Bank Farm

The Food Bank Farm is one example of CSAs combining with community service programs.

[www.foodbankwma.org/farm.htm](http://www.foodbankwma.org/farm.htm)

CSAs can be very large, serving 500 families or more, or very small, serving less than 20. While most CSAs offer produce from one farm, there are cooperative CSAs, where several farmers join together to offer members a wider selection and more quantity. Some farmers even do both. Voiland is a member of a cooperative CSA, in addition to running his own.

"It works out nicely because the farms are on different scales," says Voiland. "It provides the small farms with a more consistent market and it provides larger farms with marketing assistance, including more exposure and more markets."



Some CSAs even tie into other community programs. For example, the Food Bank Farm in Western Massachusetts is a 60-acre farm that provides 150,000 pounds of organic produce to The Food Bank of Western Massachusetts programs each year. CSA memberships help support the farm and its food distribution.

CSAs charge varying amounts for shares. Some charge \$250 for a 22-week season, others \$500. Cost depends on the particular farm, its geographic location, quantity and variety of crops and added services. Many CSAs also offer a work share, where members can work on the farm in exchange for all or part of their share.

Distribution to CSA members varies. Some CSA members must pick up their baskets at the farm, while others provide one or several in-town pick-up sites. Distribution generally depends on the size and location of the CSA.

A CSA serving an urban area may offer several pick-up sites within the city, while smaller, rural CSAs expect members to pick up their own baskets. Some CSAs even offer front-door delivery, either for an additional cost or as part of the member fee.

Peter Wilsrud in Ojai, Calif., works two acres of land and provides vegetables to 25 to 40 families. He sets out the boxes one day a week and members come to the farm to pick up their shares. Despite any inconvenience of having to pick up their shares at the farm, Wilsrud says that he has to turn members away.

CSAs work for several reasons. The pre-harvest deposit allows farmers the freedom to plan their season and also gets them through lean times. Given the vagaries of farming, this allows the farmer to risk less each harvest.

Because he or she has already been paid for shares of the harvest, they are able to pay for equipment, seeds and farm help without indebting themselves.

"CSAs provide stability with long-term commitment," says Voiland. "The deposit before the season helps with the cash crunch in the beginning of the season."

The shareholder does take on some of the farmer's risk: The farmer divides the crop among members and if pests ruin the tomato crop, the shareholders get no tomatoes.

However, if the crop is successful, members receive farm-fresh, often-organic produce at a fraction of the cost they would pay for organic produce in a grocery store. Some farmers say that a CSA member pays as little as 50 percent of the amount they would otherwise.

"It's a very reasonable way to improve your diet," says Redmond.

#### Know Where Your Food Comes From

More important than savings for many consumers is that they know where their food comes from. Food security is a big issue among many CSA members. Involvement in a CSA also provides an important link between farms and consumers--leading to stronger support for small farms and agricultural concerns.

"One element is supporting the small farms," says Davis, Calif., CSA member Janice Corner. "It's a social and political choice to make sure they can stay in business so they can keep growing healthy food."

The system allows the public to support small farms and rural life on an intimate level. Without the CSA option, many small farms wouldn't survive.

CSA participation often leads members to become active in supporting small farms and agriculture in both direct and indirect ways. A CSA member, for example, helps a small farm stay in business through their share purchase but they also may be more likely to support a bill preserving ag land in a periphery urban area.

"For a lot of people it goes beyond the produce," says Voiland. "They feel they're part of a community and feel like they're doing something to preserve small farms."

Redmond agrees, "After they've been members for awhile it goes way deeper than the food. They start to feel really connected to the farm. It provides city dwellers a grounding and a connection to the cycle."

Community supported agriculture originated in Japan and Switzerland in the 1960s as a way to combine the interests of



farms and consumers. Small farmers were seeking a stable market, while consumers were looking for food security. With the move toward large-scale commercial farms during the 1900s, small farms had been pushed out and consumers were largely left with impersonal, anonymous sources for their vegetables.

CSAs slowly started cropping up in European countries throughout the 1970s and finally made their way to the United States by the 1980s. Now, there are hundreds, if not thousands, of CSAs across the country, with a wide range in location and size.

#### Marketing Idea for Small Farms

As small farms struggle economically, they are constantly looking for new ways to market themselves. While many have turned to farmer's markets and roadside stands, others have incorporated a CSA program, either on its own or in conjunction with other marketing methods.

"The CSA is one-third of our business," says Redmond. "It's a really important part of our farm."

The level of marketing varies widely among CSAs. Many farmers say that their business is largely word-of-mouth and that they do minimal marketing, other farmers are highly conscious of ways to attract and keep customers.

To attract members, CSAs market themselves by distributing brochures, having a stand at a local farmer's market or joining a farm cooperative, which may distribute brochures with information on local agriculture.

Janice Corner learned about the Eat Well Farm CSA, of which she is a member, through a co-worker who had a brochure. "I looked into it and saw that there was an option that worked for me. I get one basket every other week."

The flexibility of the schedule, convenience, and the fact that the CSA provides recipes for unfamiliar vegetables has kept Corner involved. "Mine is really convenient, I just walk across my neighborhood. The baskets are on the back porch of a neighbor."

Corner adds that she appreciates Eat Well's presence at local festivals, where they often set up a table. It allows her to interact with the farmers and she sees it as a powerful marketing tool for the CSA.

Corner adds that flexibility and convenience are key to her continued involvement in the CSA; something that most CSA farmers seem to know from experience.

"We're really flexible," says Redmond. "We've designed the CSA to be flexible and convenient for people. For example, if someone wants a box every other week they can really just get the box when they want it." CSAs generally allow members to stop delivery for vacation or donate a week to charity.

Voiland offers members the opportunity to pick up vegetables at an in-town site or on the farm, where they can mix and match the vegetables they want. In town, he provides a trade box, so members can discard vegetables they don't like in exchange for vegetables they enjoy more.

"A trade box made sense right from the beginning," explains Voiland, "people have preferences."

While some CSAs are bare bones, others differentiate themselves by delivering member shares in woven baskets or wooden pails. Often farmers provide recipe cards for unusual vegetables, as well as other personal touches, such as a few sprigs of a fragrant herb or fresh flowers.

Some CSAs also offer value-added products, such as fresh-baked bread, bouquets of flowers, farm-raised eggs or meat, or preserves.

A number of CSAs also use websites to promote their CSA and provide information to members. Many CSAs provide the contents of the upcoming week's basket, so members know what they're getting.

As the seasons progress, the basket offerings change: Spring generally provides lettuce, greens, peas and herbs. In the first week or two, the number of items may be few: a couple heads of lettuce, a pound of peas, and a bunch of carrots.

As the harvest progresses, there are generally more choices and larger amounts. Some weeks will bring 18 to 20 items in a basket. If the farmer has too much corn, a member may find 12 ears in their basket, which they can share with their neighbors or freeze for winter.



Voiland adds that if there is any complaint among members it's that they sometimes get too much of one thing, so he tries to accommodate that through the trade box.

Convenient pick-up sites are also essential to the success of a CSA. Generally, a large CSA provides several sites in each town they serve. Some pick-ups are at the Sunday farmer's market, others at a library or school or just an amenable CSA member's porch.

To keep members involved, many CSAs invite their members out to the farm either to pick their own vegetables or for annual festivals.

"Some of the crops are difficult to pick so we reserve a section of the field and offer them as U-pick for our members," explains Voiland. "Members can come out and pick as many strawberries, raspberries, beans, peas and herbs as they want. That means we don't have to pick them and they get the opportunity to bring the family out to the farm."

Red Fire Farm also has a tomato festival each year, when they offer tastes of their 50 varieties of heirloom, along with hay rides and seed-saving workshops. Full Belly Farm has a farm day for their members once a year, with classes and other events.

Ultimately, however, the proof comes in the baskets. "It comes down to having good produce," says Voiland. "Every Wednesday I pick up a wonderful basket of freshly harvested, organically grown edibles," marvels CSA member Corner. "I'm eating more vegetables than I would have and making new things. It makes people into healthy eaters."

About the Author Kristin Mehus-Roe is a freelance writer based in Long Beach, Calif.

This article first appeared in the Fall 2002 issue of Hobby Farms magazine. [Subscribe to Hobby Farms online](#)>