

COMMUNITY SUPPORTED AGRICULTURE

THE PRODUCER / CONSUMER PARTNERSHIP

XCM-189

Food is a basic human need. Yet for most of us, it is merely an inexpensive commodity that we take for granted. Issues surrounding how, where, or by whom it is grown generally are not the topic of conversation around the dinner table. However, considering current trends, perhaps they should be. Agricultural land in Colorado is being lost, primarily to the onslaught of development, at the rate of 90,000 acres per year. Take a look at what is growing on some of our best farmland and we will see one of today's most highly-valued crops: new homes. Working landscapes are either being consumed by urban sprawl or fragmented into mini-ranchettes. Meanwhile, a large percentage of our food is highly processed and travels at least 1,000 miles before reaching market shelves. We've grown accustomed to the current state of affairs, often unaware of its hidden costs and long-term repercussions. As the percentage of our population directly involved with farming and ranching declines, most of us find ourselves in a long-distance relationship with agriculture, seldom participating in decisions that help determine land use policy and farm support programs.

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) represents an alternative to the

current mode of food production and distribution. It reflects an innovative and resourceful strategy to connect local farmers with local consumers; maintain a regional food supply and economic base; establish a sense of community land stewardship; and honor the craft of small farmers.

The purpose of this publication is to provide a broad overview of Community Supported Agriculture, including reflections on the system by Colorado CSA farmers and members, and a directory of additional resources.

What Is Community Supported Agriculture?

CSA is a unique economic model for small-scale farming that has been adopted in many regions of the United States since 1985. Its ancestral roots are in both Europe and Japan, reaching back approximately 30 years. CSA is a loose partnership of mutual commitment between a farm and a community of supporters that provides a direct link between the production and consumption of food. Supporters cover a farm's yearly operating budget by purchasing a share of the season's harvest. Shareholders (CSA

members) make a commitment to support the farm throughout the season, and assume the costs, risks and bounty of growing food with the farmer. They help pay for seeds, fertilizer, water, equipment maintenance, labor, etc. In return, the farm provides, to the best of its ability, a healthy supply of seasonal fresh produce throughout the growing season. Becoming a shareholder creates a responsible relationship between people and the food they eat, the land on which it is grown and those who grow it.

This mutually supportive relationship between local farmers and community members helps create an economically stable farm operation in which members are assured the highest quality produce, often at below retail prices. In turn, farmers are guaranteed a reliable market for a diverse selection of crops. CSAs also create a vehicle for important dialogue, community development and environmental stewardship.

Colorado CSA farmers share a common vision – they each wish to connect local producers more closely to local consumers, to secure the perpetuity of farmland and farming skills, to lay the foundations for greater self-sufficiency within our state, and to contribute to the strengthening of community. They are not out to compete with agribusiness, but rather to provide an alternative for individuals seeking a more regional, sustainable and community-based approach to food production.

How Does It Work?

Money, Members and Management

The farmer, often with the assistance of a *core group*, draws up a budget reflecting the production costs for the year. This includes all farmer/gardener salaries, distribution costs, investments for seeds and tools, land payments, machinery maintenance, etc. The budget is then divided by the number of

people for which the farm/garden site will provide and this determines the cost of each *share* of the harvest. One share usually is designed to provide the weekly vegetable needs for a family of four. Flowers, fruit, meat, honey, eggs and dairy products also are available through some CSAs.

Community members sign up and purchase their shares, either in one lump sum in early spring before the first seeds are sown, or in several installments throughout the growing season. Production

expenses are thereby guaranteed and the farmer/gardener starts receiving income as soon as work begins.

In return for their investment, members receive a bag of fresh, locally-grown, typically organic produce once a week from late spring through early fall, and occasionally throughout the winter, if a root cellar or cold storage is available. The members count on a wide variety of vegetables and herbs, which encourages integrated cropping and companion planting. These practices help reduce risk factors and give mul-

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