

From Farm to Front Door

by Mark Hawthorne

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There's a delicious surprise waiting for me every Tuesday when I come home: an abundant assortment of organic fruits and vegetables harvested that day and delivered from a local farm to my doorstep. Since joining a community supported agriculture program, or CSA, I have been introduced to a world of produce that I had previously passed up in favor of the veggies that were familiar to me. Little did I know how many varieties of kale there are or that fennel could taste great tossed in a salad. Being a CSA member has revealed just how little I knew about produce, and I confess to beholding more than a few vegetables and wondering just what it was. A turnip? A beet? Some sort of giant radish? (Actually, one was a giant radish.) It's all part of the fun and discovery of CSA.

Community sponsored agriculture has been benefiting members, farmers, and the environment in the U.S. for the last two decades. In its simplest form, the CSA initiative is a system in which a group of consumers pay in advance for food grown on a nearby farm. When the crop is abundant, so are the members' shares of produce; conversely, they receive less produce if the crop does not do as well. Members can pick up their share at the farm, but many farmers will also deliver.

Consumers who join a CSA project enjoy the freshest possible seasonal produce and can even take part in the harvest. Nearly every CSA farm uses organic farming techniques, virtually eliminating concerns about pesticides and other toxic substances. Moreover, not only do members receive their share of the crop at a cost typically less than what they'd pay at a farmers' market or grocery store, but the CSA farmer can spend more time concentrating on growing quality fruits and vegetables and less time worrying about how to market them.

European Roots

There is some debate about how the CSA movement began in the United States. Many sources cite Japan's teikei clubs (partnerships with local farmers) as the inspiration for the programs that began in the U.S. But Steven McFadden, co-author of *Farms of Tomorrow: Community Supported Farms, Farm Supported Communities*, credits post-World War II Europe with influencing the creation of two community farms on this side of the Atlantic in 1986: Indian Line Farm in Massachusetts and Temple-Wilton Community Farm in New Hampshire; both farms are still active. McFadden estimates there are now as many as 2,500 subscription-based farms in this country. "But the organizations that actually count how many CSAs there are often say fifteen hundred to two thousand," he says. "Not all CSAs want to be counted -- many lie low."

One of the buzzwords to come from community supported agriculture is biodynamics. The biodynamic system, practiced by about 600 CSA farms in the U.S. (including the two original farms), is agriculture based on the teachings of Austrian educator and social thinker Rudolf Steiner. In the 1920s, Steiner recognized that pesticides and chemical fertilizers were degrading the nutritional quality of foods. The U.S.-based Biodynamic Farming and Gardening Association describes biodynamics as a science of life-forces that recognizes the basic principles at work in nature and an approach to agriculture that fosters balance and healing. It is this emphasis on healing that distinguishes biodynamically grown from other organically grown food.

Whether it's in Japan, Europe, or the United States, at the heart of every CSA is a commitment to creating small farms that are at once profitable for participants and respectful to the land. This tenet results in sustainable agriculture and responsible stewardship; soil is not exhausted and harmful chemicals do not end up in water systems. And rather than being picked green and shipped thousands of miles to a grocery store, produce from a CSA ends up in the homes of members within just a few miles of the farm -- another win for the environment.

Expanding the Model

In order for CSAs to realize their full potential as a large agricultural system, new farmers must be able to regard these small farms as a viable business. Start-up ventures are already expensive, and few people have enough capital to acquire the land needed for a farm. One answer is a community land trust. When Indian Line Farm co-founder Robyn Van En died in 1997, the farm was acquired by a partnership between the Community Land Trust of the Southern Berkshires, Inc., which purchased the land, and two farmers, who purchased the farm buildings and leased back the land through a 99-year renewable lease. The lease sets minimum crop productions and organic standards. The farmers build equity in their improvements on the land, but the land value itself is excluded from future resale.

"This is a way for new farmers to get into farming," explains Susan Witt, executive director of the Schumacher Center for a New Economics, a nonprofit organization headquartered about a mile from Indian Line Farm. "That one-time purchase of land value by citizens secured a permanent land base for growing vegetables for local consumption." The Schumacher Center was instrumental in assisting with the land trust purchase of Indian Line Farm and continues to build on this model to remove land from the speculative market and facilitate multiple uses such as agriculture, affordable housing, and open space preservation.

It seems only natural that local farming could be just the beginning of an economy based upon the principles of human-scale sustainable development. Witt foresees community-based businesses that echo the CSA concept, with local citizens paying in advance for goods and services. Such a system helps the small-business owner with capital, and consumers become members who share in the risks and rewards of their local economy. To encourage an affinity among citizens and local merchants, the Schumacher

Center has helped create a local currency called BerkShares that began circulating in the Southern Berkshire region in 2006. Citizens can exchange US\$90 for 100 BerkShares at participating banks. Local merchants will accept BerkShares at full value, giving shoppers a 10% discount for keeping their spending within the community. With this kind of innovative thinking, who knows how far the CSA model can grow?

To find a CSA project in your area, just type "community supported agriculture" into your favorite search engine. You can also visit www.csacenter.org and www.localharvest.org.