

Community Supported Agriculture

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Editor's note: the following article was written as a class assignment for Dr. Greg Welbaum's Vegetable Production course at Virginia Tech. Emily provides some good history and information on the CSA marketing option for specialty crop growers.

Community Supported Agriculture is a relatively new trend in agricultural production. As mid-sized farms are bought out by large-scale producers, the number of family farms is declining. In addition, produce travels an average of 1500 miles from producer to consumer. (2) There is a movement around the world to bring back a sense of community and to involve that community in the local production of vegetables. Farmers are now turning to consumers to share in the risk of production.

The History of Community Supported Agriculture

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) was introduced to the United States in approximately 1985, but has been practiced in Europe and Japan for a number of decades. As the number of farms declined, and the population increased, people started to become concerned about the origin of their food source. In 1986 Jan Vander Tuin started the first CSA in Massachusetts. (1) Since that time, the movement has exploded, and there are now approximately 600 CSAs in North America. (4)

Definition

Community Supported Agriculture is a method of farming where the "middle man" is eliminated. Farmers sell share of the next year's crop in the fall, then plan, plant, harvest and distribute to the shareholders accordingly. The organization may be set up in a variety of ways. The farmer may set up the CSA and recruit shareholders, the community can buy land and hire a farmer to grow the crop they desire, or a combination of these arrangements may be made. CSAs may also be run as a cooperative involving other producers in the community. In this way more products may be made available to the shareholders, such as fruit, bread, meat and even flowers. (1,3,4)

Planning and Production

Planning and timing of the vegetable garden are the most difficult things facing the CSA farmer. In order to market the shares, the producer has to have a wide variety of vegetables evenly produced over the calendar year. Growing this wide variety of crops on small acreage is a very different situation than the average farmer faces. The farmer has to plan an intensive schedule to ensure this diversity of crops. Surveys are often given to the members to determine which crops they prefer, and the amounts of each vegetable grown. Excess share is often a problem, as consumers don't like having to throw away leftover vegetables each week. This is a common reason for shareholders to terminate their membership. (1)

Due to the variety of crops grown on little acreage, a large amount of specialized machinery is not warranted. Therefore labor is intensive, and the highest cost of production. The farmer must be extremely organized and efficient to be successful.

Community Supported Agriculture farms are often run organically. Despite the extra cost and organization, the consumers are generally more interested in this production method than the appearance of the produce. Also, due to the shortened time between harvest and distribution (often the same day), the produce has little time to degrade. (5)



A Typical Cool Season Share

Distribution methods for CSAs vary. The type used is dependent on the structure of the CSA and the area served. If the members are local, they can pick up their share at the farm, or they can be easily delivered. As most CSAs serve large areas, most have a distribution system. A typical system involves a representative member from each area picking up produce at the farm each week, then taking it to a common place where the area members can pick up their weekly share. This may be a town park or parking lot. Whole food stores are sometimes used, and the owners don't seem to mind as it brings them extra business as well. (3)

CSA Membership

Membership is the most important aspect of the CSA. The most successful way of maintaining shareholders from year to year seems to be by getting them involved on the farm. This brings that community feel and gives them a direct link to the food they consume. (5)

Membership in the organization is usually purchased in the fall prior to the upcoming season. This allows the farmer to plan the appropriate size and variety of the crops needed, as well as providing a bank account to work from during the season. Membership fees cover the operating budget (seed, labor, and fertilizer) but also other costs such as machinery, administrative and distribution costs.

Memberships are often offered in whole or half shares (providing a variety in the amount of produce offered) as well as working and non-working memberships. Working shares usually include about 20 hours of work each season. This work is generally flexible, and can be served on the farm, during distribution, or administration. (1,3,5)

Benefits of Community Supported Agriculture

Community Supported Agriculture provides many benefits to the farmer, member, and also to the community. The farmer can market the shares and do most of the planning in the winter months, allowing full attention to the crops and distribution during the growing season. The consumer shares the crop risk, so losses are not as detrimental to the farmer. Shares are paid for before most expenses are incurred, so loans need not be taken out. An added benefit is the appreciative clientele that CSAs usually attract.

The shareholders' major benefit is the high quality produce available to them. The consumers know exactly where their product has come from, and often times have had some hand in producing it. They support the local economy, keeping money in the area, and reducing dependence on outside sources. Shareholders can often bring their children and family to the farms, letting them "experience" the country atmosphere. (1,3,4,5)

Keys to Success

In order for the CSA type of agriculture to work and the farmer to make a profit, several standards that must be maintained. The production must be efficient, as labor costs are high and there is little profit margin. The farmer needs to be organized, so that the produce and product information gets to the consumer in a timely manner. Information about the produce and recipes help the consumer to make better use of their weekly share. The share should be diverse and change weekly. Surveys should be taken annually to determine the crops desired by the members and the amounts they feel they can use each week. Lastly, the farmer should try to maintain a good relationship with the shareholders. This relationship can be established with tours, open houses, and festivals, as well working memberships. (1,5)

Conclusion

Community Supported Agriculture is a growing trend in agriculture. With the decline in the family farm and a rising interest in the origin of food, this trend will continue.

Sources

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