



photo courtesy of Ariel Agenbroad

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University of Idaho
Extension

COMMUNITY SUPPORTED AGRICULTURE (CSA) IN IDAHO:

Seasonal eating week by week

by Lydia Clayton, Cinda Williams, and Ariel Agenbroad

WHAT IS CSA?

Community supported agriculture—CSA—is a collaborative, shared-risk approach to local food production that encourages consumers to purchase food products directly from producers in a partnership of mutual commitment and benefit.

Consumers pay up-front early in the year for a subscription or 'share' of the farm. As the name implies, 'Community Supported Agriculture' means that customers or shareholders support the farm by assuming some of the operating risk. They also share in its rewards with plentiful fresh-from-the-field produce throughout the season.

CSA originated in Europe and Japan in the 1960s by people concerned with the increase of imported foods; by 1985 the concept had arrived in the United States. CSAs have grown in popularity across North America, with current estimates suggesting more than 12,500 in operation throughout the United States. In 2012, Idaho had at least 60 farms offering CSA shares, everything from range-fed lambs or beef to a broad array of fruits and vegetables.

WHY SUPPORT CSA?

There are plenty of reasons one might choose CSA. First of all, for good health! The USDA urges American consumers to eat more fruits and vegetables and to choose a healthier, more varied mix of these foods.

CSA also benefits local family farms and regional food systems. Many feel that CSA significantly contributes to a strong local economy. In addition to receiving farm fresh products on a regular basis, members frequently receive the benefits of reconnecting with the land and participating directly in their local food system.

WHAT CAN I EXPECT FROM A CSA?

Most Idaho CSAs provide farm fresh produce weekly throughout the local growing season. Many producers are diversifying their CSA options to also include fruit, flowers, eggs, meat, poultry, dairy products, honey, or other products. Some innovative producers are creating CSAs of various sizes for different sized families or offering monthly or bi-monthly deliveries rather than weekly. Individual CSA structures are designed to meet the needs of both the producer and consumers.



photo by Ariel Agenbrood

HOW CAN I FIND CSAS IN MY AREA?

Here are some ways to search for CSA in your area.

The following organizations or businesses provide contact information for Idaho CSA farms:

- Local Harvest www.localharvest.org/csa. Search under the "farms" tab by state or zip code.
- Rodale's New Farm www.Newfarm.org/farmlocator
- Sustainable Table/The Eat Well Guide www.eatwellguide.org

Other sources of CSAs that may be available in your area include local farm organizations, granges, garden clubs, producer supply stores, food cooperative, farmers' markets, your local county UI Extension office, and even Facebook.

CSA members may expect varying quantities and types of products, some of which may be unfamiliar to them. Produce shares will reflect what is seasonally available. Early season shares, for example, may be full of greens and other spring crops, while favorites such as tomatoes, sweet corn, and squash are available in later season shares. Many CSA providers will offer recipe suggestions for using unfamiliar and unusual produce, such as kale, arugula, or kohlrabi.

Typical delivery methods include: produce delivered directly to a consumer's residence, centralized points of pick-up, or on-farm pick-up by the consumer. Vegetables and other products may be presorted into baskets, bags, or boxes for each CSA member, or you may need to fill your own boxes from cartons of different vegetables as instructed by the grower. Some growers offer additional u-pick opportunities such as flowers, herbs, and small fruits, to customers who pick-up at the farm. While most farms don't offer refunds if members can't pick up shares, many allow shares to be picked up by friends or donate unclaimed shares to local foodbank programs.

ARE CSAs ORGANIC?

CSA members are encouraged to inquire with their CSA farmer or to visit their local farm to gain a better understanding of its management practices. CSA farms may be certified organic through the Idaho State Department of Agriculture (www.agri.state.id.us/Categories/PlantsInsects/Organic/indexOrganicHome.php) or other qualifying certifier. Certified organic producers must follow a nationally regulated set of parameters on the types of farming practices and products that can be used in food production. These parameters are set by the United States Department of Agriculture National Organic Program (www.ams.usda.gov/nop). Producers often choose whether or not to become certified organic based on the demands of their market and shareholders.

Those who choose not to be certified organic often use organic or sustainable production practices anyway, such as increasing biodiversity, soil conservation, and ecological pest management. Additional information on organic and sustainable production methods can be found at Alternative Farming Information Center website at <http://afsic.nal.usda.gov> or references listed at the end of this publication.

WHAT IS THE COST OF A CSA SUBSCRIPTION AND HOW IS THE MONEY USED?

The cost of a CSA share varies widely depending on the variety and quantity of products and the length of product availability. Price for a produce CSA typically ranges from \$300 to \$600 per season and may vary from 12 weeks to 6 months depending on the growing season.

Many CSAs are designed with a base cost for produce and additional costs for added products such as fruit, eggs, cheese, honey, or even meat. Some farms offer different share sizes, perhaps a large size which feeds 3 to 4 people and a smaller size for 1 to 2 people. Farmers base their share prices on farm operating costs and are often comparable to retail market value. Often it's easier to think about CSA costs on a weekly or individual share basis. For example, a CSA that costs \$300 and includes a 16 week season costs \$20 per week.

Share costs are usually paid by shareholders before the start of the growing season. Some producers request a base payment amount to hold a share for a customer, with additional payments accepted throughout the growing season. Others may require complete payment up-front to hold a share, and some may allow for weekly payment at time of pick-up.



photo by Ariel Agenbroad

Farming is a complicated process involving many risks, and these risks can often be a barrier to farm start-up or expansion. Community Supported Agriculture, like its name implies, is a partnership between producers and consumers which allows both parties to equally share the risks, providing greater security for growers. When considering a CSA membership, be aware that you are agreeing to support the farmer, pay upfront, and assume the risk of a potential crop failure. At the same time, expect your farmer to keep you informed on farm practices, availability of seasonal crops on the farm, and potentials for shortages or extras on any crops. Many farmers distribute weekly newsletters to keep members abreast of activities and make customers feel like part of the farm. This personal connection to your farmer is the reason more and more people are choosing to join a CSA.

QUESTIONS TO ASK, AND HOW DO I SIGN UP FOR A CSA?

Many CSA farms begin advertising available shares in winter. Established CSA farms typically offer shares first to returning shareholders from the prior year, with the remaining shares available on a 'first-come, first-serve' basis or waiting list. Newer CSAs will be more likely to have available shares.

A good relationship between farmer and shareholder in a CSA is very important. You want to join the CSA that best fits your needs. When searching for a CSA, don't be afraid to ask the producer questions before signing up about the history of the CSA, the types and quantities of products in the shares, payment options, or even references from current or former shareholders. Many producers have websites, newsletters, or brochures that provide details about CSA options.



photo courtesy of Deep Roots Farm, 2011

MORE ABOUT CSAS AND/OR SMALL AND SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE ONLINE

University of Idaho Small Farms Program

Website with resources, opportunities for networking, calendar of events, and links to past and present UI research and education.

www.ag.uidaho.edu/sustag/smallfarms/

University of Idaho Educational Communications offers free and low-cost publications, videos, and websites focused on food and farming.

www.cals.uidaho.edu/edComm/catalog.asp

United States Department of Agriculture Community Supported Agriculture Resources for Farmers

www.nal.usda.gov/afsic/pubs/csa/csa.shtml

Robyn Van En Center for CSA Resources

www.csacenter.org

Idaho State Department of Agriculture—You can download an ISDA Organic Directory listing more than 200 organic farms in Idaho. Contact ones nearest you to see if they offer a CSA program.

www.agri.state.id.us/Categories/PlantsInsects/Organic/Documents/OrganicDirectory.pdf

Rural Roots, Inc. *Local Food Guide for Idaho and the Inland Northwest* www.ruralroots.org

Biodynamic Farming and Gardening Association www.biodynamics.com/csa1.html

Food Routes www.foodroutes.org

BOOK

Sharing the Harvest: A Guide to Community-Supported Agriculture by Elizabeth Henderson with Robyn Van En. Lays out the basic tenets of CSA programs for farmers and consumers. (800) 639-4099; www.chelseagreen.com



photo courtesy of LadyBird Farms, 2010

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