

## WHAT IS COMMUNITY SUPPORTED AGRICULTURE (CSA)?

CSA is a relationship of mutual support and commitment between local farmers and community members who pay the farmer an annual membership fee to cover the production costs of the farm. In turn, members receive a weekly share of the harvest during the local growing season. The arrangement guarantees the farmer financial support and enables many small- to moderate-scale organic family farms to remain in business. Ultimately, CSA creates "agriculture-supported communities" where members receive a wide variety of foods harvested at their peak of ripeness, flavor and vitamin and mineral content.

As Wendell Berry identifies, "how we eat determines to a considerable extent how the world is used." With this in mind, it is important to remember that the goals of CSA support a sustainable agriculture system which . . .

- *provides farmers with direct outlets for farm products and ensures fair compensation*
- *encourages proper land stewardship by supporting farmers in transition toward low or no chemical inputs*
- *strengthens local economies by keeping food dollars in local communities*
- *directly links producers with consumers allowing people to have a personal connection with their food and the land on which it was produced*
- *makes nutritious, affordable, wholesome foods accessible and widely available to community members.*

There are many kinds of CSA. All include payment in advance at an agreed upon price. In some, members of the community purchase a "share" of the anticipated harvest, while in others they sign up for a predetermined amount of produce over the course of the season. In most cases, this commitment implies a willingness to share with the farmer both the bounty from the land and at least some of the risks involved with production.

In return for fair and guaranteed compensation, consumers receive a variety of freshly picked, (usually organic) vegetables grown and distributed in an economically viable and ecologically responsible manner. Some farms also offer fruit, herbs, flowers and other products. In this way, farmers and members become partners in the production, distribution and consumption of locally grown food.

One fact also to consider, organic food produced with local communities is not the same as organic food transported over long distances. When members

obtain food from local farmers, environmental costs associated with the transport, processing and distribution of organic food and the consumption of fossil fuels are significantly reduced. Considering that the organic food available to members was produced locally rather than transported over long distances, the cost to the environment is significantly less.

## **WHAT IS A SHARE?**

A "share" is usually enough to feed a family of four or a couple on a vegetarian diet. The price of a share for a season varies widely, depending on each farm's costs of operation, total months of distribution, variety of crops available and productivity of the soil. Most full shares fall within the range of \$500 to \$600. Actual cost of produce to the member varies, but is generally less or comparable to prices in the supermarket.

## **CSA BACKGROUND**

CSA is a relatively recent phenomenon in the United States and Canada. Teikei the CSA equivalent, which literally translated means "partnership" or "cooperation", was first developed in Japan, by a group of women concerned with the use of pesticides, the increase in processed and imported foods and the corresponding decrease in the farm population. The more philosophical translation for teikei is "food with the farmer's face on it." (Van En 1992). In 1965 Japanese women initiated a direct, cooperative relationship in which local farmers were supported by consumers on an annual basis.

In 1984 Jan Vander Tuin brought the concept of CSA to North America from Europe. Jan had co-founded a community-supported agricultural project named Topanibur, located near Zurich, Switzerland. He introduced the idea to Robyn Van En at Indian Line Farm in S. Egremont, Massachusetts and the CSA concept in North America was born.

Robyn Van En, Jan Vander Tuin, John Root, Jr. and Charlotte Zaneccchia formed a core group. They began the first season of their CSA with a small apple orchard operation, and gradually began introducing the "share the harvest" concept to the community. By spring of 1986, Hugh Ratcliffe had joined on as the farmer, and they began to offer shares in their vegetable harvest. Within four years, the Indian Line CSA expanded from 30 to 150 members. Today, thanks to the pioneer efforts of Robyn Van En, the CSA concept has spread across the nation. More than 1,000 CSA's are supported by members of local communities.