

What's a CSA? By Aubrie Wolff

If you are one who appreciates the importance of eating locally grown organic food as often as possible, you may want to consider going beyond just frequenting your local farmer's market and venture into joining a CSA, or community supported agriculture, where you can buy directly from the farmer. Recently CSAs have gained popularity, but if you are unfamiliar with the concept, here is an overview. CSAs are set up so that consumers can purchase shares from a local farmer for the season. Memberships, depending on the farm, can be purchased as half or full shares. Each week or month, produce will either be delivered or picked up, sometimes at a designated location. Usually, it is only vegetables, but some farms offer other things like meat, eggs and dairy. One farm, Jacob's Reward Farm in Parker, TX only provides wool, so there is a variety out there.

There are advantages to farmers who offer the opportunity to join their CSA. They receive payment early in the season, which allows them to be able to support their farm and market their produce before they are busy all day with their crops. They also get to know who they are selling to and can develop a relationship with the consumer, who also gets to experience potential advantages. As the farmer can get to know them, they too get to make a personal connection with the person who grows their food. Consumers can also take pride in knowing that they are getting fresh organic food that wasn't shipped halfway around the world, which is of course a tremendous environmental benefit. Consumers do need to be prepared for the potential risks associated with CSAs. Farmers cannot control all aspects of what happens with their crops. Weather will always play a huge role in determining what can be provided to the public. CSA members who have been participating in the system for a while know the risks and have generally learned to look at things long-term. However, if not always knowing exactly what you'll be getting every season is a worry for you, taking part in a CSA may not be the best option.

Let me just finish by providing a few tips for potential members: First, expect to have to supplement the produce you get from the CSA. For example, not all CSAs can provide fruit. Also, as mentioned, some produce may not be available in your area for the season depending on conditions at the farm. Second, you need to familiarize yourself with what is in season. Most of us are used to finding whatever we want at our local grocery store all year round and may not even know what is in season throughout the year. It would be advisable to do a little research so you know what to expect. Also, you should make yourself aware of the farm's policies for things like what happens if you miss a pick-up. You should also communicate with the farmer regarding the amount of produce you can expect each time. The amounts may vary as the season goes on so it is best to know ahead of time how much you may be getting. Overall, supporting a CSA can be a fantastic way for the public to promote organic and local eating as well as support what has increasingly become a rarity—the small family farm. For more information about CSAs in your area, a couple of good websites are: www.ecovian.com and www.localharvest.org