TOWARDS A COMMUNITY SUPPORTED AGRICULTURE

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) is a concept that encourages local, environmentally sustainable food production, and that supports both farmers and consumers alike.

Kristen Lyons, from Friends of the Earth, gives an overview of the CSA concept - which is discussed in more detail in recently released publication, “Towards a Community Supported Agriculture”.

As individuals and communities concerned about the environment and our health, we have some choices to make. There are competing visions for the future of food and agriculture, and the paths we choose will have a profound impact on our quality of life, and our ability to sustain our environment, rural communities and the livelihoods of farming families. At one extreme is a vision for a globally integrated food system, in which food is largely produced and controlled by private corporations, motivated by financial profit. Within this system food is seen as a primarily ‘functional’ commodity - people require a certain nutritional intake, which should be provided in the most (economically) efficient way possible. This system enables “consumers” to shop in a ‘global supermarket’, that stocks Turkish dried apricots, Californian oranges, Chinese soymilk and tomatoes from Spain.

In “Towards a Community Supported Agriculture”, recently published by Friends of the Earth Brisbane, we point towards a different vision - slow food rather than fast food, grown in the local area, rather than transported from the other side of the planet. As part of this vision, food forms an integral part in the fabric of a community, as a kind of ‘social glue’, connecting people to each other and to the earth. Community supported agriculture enables people to know where their food comes from, what’s in it, and who has grown it. This is a vision that people all over the world are exploring and creating as you read, and in the United States alone there are over 1000 community supported agriculture projects in operation. Various models of community supported agriculture are proliferating all over the world, including Latin and Central America, Asia, Europe and now beginning in Australia. The rapid and continuing growth of this movement highlights community concern in regard to genetic engineering, environmental degradation and the corporate control of food, and provides an achievable strategy for developing sustainable, local, organic food networks.

WHAT IS COMMUNITY SUPPORTED AGRICULTURE (CSA)?

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) is a concept that encourages local, environmentally sustainable food production, and that supports both farmers and consumers alike. It is a concept that originated in Switzerland and Japan in the 1960s, and its basis is to “put the farmers’ face on food”. In this way, CSA seeks to connect consumers with the story of their food, including both the farmers who grow it and the environment in which it is produced.

Although CSA’s take many forms - reflecting the diversity of cultural, geographic and economic contexts in which they operate - the essence is that supporters cover all, or part of a farm’s yearly operating budget by purchasing a share of the season’s harvest - up front! CSA members make a commitment to support the farm throughout the season, and assume the costs, risks and bounty of growing food along with the farmer. This mutually supportive relationship between local farmers and community members helps create an economically stable farm operation in which members are assured the highest quality produce, often at below retail prices. In return, farmers and growers are guaranteed a reliable market for a diverse selection of crops. This marks a stark contrast to the global industrial food system, where growers often struggle to find a market for their produce, and must sometimes sell for less than the cost of production.

SHARING RISKS OF FOOD PRODUCTION...

An additional key difference between Community Supported Agriculture and our current industrial food system is that the risks of production are shared equally between the people who benefit.
Under the industrial, and increasingly
globalised model of agriculture, farmers
are subject to the whims of ‘the market’,
which can be even more unpredictable
than the weather or other natural disas-
ters. With large mono-crops in particu-
lar, a single ‘event’, be it a market price
drop, a hail storm, flood, insect plague
or late frost, can often be enough to put
a small farmer out of business. Consumers
on the other hand, remain oblivious
to the problem - they are still able to
purchase their tomatoes, or whatever -
and probably wouldn’t even notice that
this time they come from Spain instead
of from the Brisbane Valley.

The need to eliminate risk is one of the
key drivers of the ‘green revolution’ and
the industrialisation of agriculture, in
which nature is seen as a ‘nuisance’ to be
controlled, rather than as the source of
life, which we know it to be. In this way,
the sharing of risk which occurs though
CSA goes directly to the real issues of
environmental sustainability in agricul-
ture, by providing a model of ‘risk man-
agement’ which is based on community
co-operation, rather than control of na-
ture.

THE BENEFITS
OF COMMUNITY
SUPPORTED
AGRICULTURE...

Farmers, ‘consumers’ and the broader
community can all benefit from the ex-
pansion of CSA initiatives throughout
Australia. For Australian farmers, par-
ticipation in a CSA creates an opportu-
nity to ensure a reliable income that is
received at planting time - when it is
needed most - rather than at harvest. The
CSA scheme also ensures farmers will
have a market for their produce, as share-
holders commit to membership for the
season. With less effort needed for mar-
keting produce, producers can then spend
more time on farm management, helping
to ensure the long-term sustainability of
the farming system. Importantly, all
members of a CSA share the risks of food
production equally, and this connection
helps build meaningful connections and
understandings between farmers and the
people who benefit from their work. Stud-
ies elsewhere also indicate that CSA
schemes reduce the loss and waste of har-
vested farm produce, further facilitating
the expansion of sustainable food net-
works.

‘Consumers’ also benefit by gaining ac-
cess to freshly picked, quality, organic
seasonal produce at a lower cost than
would otherwise be possible. Recent stud-
ies with members of CSA operations in
California also indicate CSA membership
increases the diversity of fruit and veg-
estables eaten, and enables participants to
experiment with new food varieties and
recipes. The relationship between farm-
ers and members cultivated with CSA also
‘de-commodifies’ food, by enabling share-
holders to know where their food comes
from and how it is grown, and by re-es-
ablishing the connections between people
and the land.

CSA initiatives also have a positive ripple
effect for the communities that surround
them. By supporting the preservation of
small and biodiverse farms, CSA’s culti-
vate rich and diverse communities. The
continuance of such small-scale farms,
particularly near metropolitan areas, can
also protect the loss of farm land to ur-
ban sprawl. By connecting consumers
with producers in their local area, CSA’s
can also reduce the resources wasted in
marketing, packaging and transporting
produce, thereby reducing pollution and
energy associated with the production
and distribution of food.

Community supported agriculture rep-
resents a real and viable alternative to
the global industrial model widely pro-
acted by governments and multinational
food companies and commodity traders.
CSA initiatives are enabling local com-
unities and environments to flourish,
creating healthy and safe places for
people to live and work. Worldwide farm-
ers and consumers are taking the lead in
developing these local food networks.
In doing this, they are creating the path to-
wards socially just and environmentally
responsible food systems.

If you would like a copy of “Towards a Community Sup-
ported Agriculture”, would
like to learn more about Com-
munity Supported Agricul-
ture, or are interested in set-
ting up a CSA in your region,
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