

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.



Queensland Sugar Grower, Tony Huth, examines a CSA "Box Scheme" on a recent farm study tour to the USA



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 disasters. With large mono-crops in particular, 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 agriculture, by providing a model of 'risk management' which is based on community co-operation, rather than control of nature.

THE BENEFITS OF COMMUNITY SUPPORTED AGRICULTURE...

Farmers, 'consumers' and the broader community can all benefit from the expansion of CSA initiatives throughout Australia. For Australian farmers, participation 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 shareholders commit to membership for the season. With less effort needed for marketing 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. Studies elsewhere also indicate that CSA schemes reduce the loss and waste of harvested farm produce, further facilitating the expansion of sustainable food networks.

'Consumers' also benefit by gaining access to freshly picked, quality, organic seasonal produce at a lower cost than would otherwise be possible. Recent studies with members of CSA operations in California also indicate CSA membership increases the diversity of fruit and vegetables eaten, and enables participants to experiment with new food varieties and recipes. The relationship between farmers and members cultivated with CSA also 'de-commodifies' food, by enabling shareholders to know where their food comes from and how it is grown, and by re-establishing 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 cultivate rich and diverse communities. The continuance of such small-scale farms, particularly near metropolitan areas, can also protect the loss of farm land to urban 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 represents a real and viable alternative to the global industrial model widely promoted by governments and multinational food companies and commodity traders. CSA initiatives are enabling local communities and environments to flourish, creating healthy and safe places for people to live and work. Worldwide farmers and consumers are taking the lead in developing these local food networks. In doing this, they are creating the path towards socially just and environmentally responsible food systems.

If you would like a copy of "Towards a Community Supported Agriculture", would like to learn more about Community Supported Agriculture, or are interested in setting up a CSA in your region, please contact Friends of the Earth Brisbane at 294 Montague Rd, West End, QLD 4101. Ph: 07) 3846 5793. Fax: 07) 3846 4791. Email: foebrisbane@uq.net.au.