

Community Supported Agriculture



By Chase Coakley, Soil Conservationist
USDA - NRCS

So what is Community Supported Agriculture (CSA)? CSA is a grassroots movement that provides opportunities for local marketing of farm goods directly to individual consumers. In short, consumers can purchase “shares” of product from a local CSA producer and in return enjoy fresh produce and other farm goods throughout the entire growing season. There are wide variations among the product CSA producers provide. Items could range from simple vegetables to meats, canned goods, and even organic products. In all cases consumers can expect weekly allotments of the freshest foods around.

Every CSA will be a little different, but here are the basics: CSA producers offer a certain number of “shares” or contracts to individual consumers. Shares are sometimes paid upfront for the entire season or monthly. Participating consumers will be allotted a weekly supply of goods produced by your CSA; this allotment will either be delivered or subject to pickup at a determined location. Contact your local CSA producers for additional information about policies, fees, and shared risk (producer and consumer share the risk of bad farming seasons).

CSA may not be an option for everyone due to their distribution but for those able to participate, CSA is a great opportunity to obtain fresh locally raised products and provides an alternative to farmers markets, gardening, and commercial grocery stores.

The benefits for consumers who support or join CSA include:

- Eating ultra-fresh food, with all the flavor and vitamin benefits
- Get exposed to new vegetables and new ways of cooking
- Usually get an opportunity to visit the farm where the food is grown
- Discovering that their kids typically favor food from "their" farm – even veggies they've never been known to eat
- Developing a relationship with the farmer who grows the food and learning more about how food is grown

Wondering why you should become a CSA producer? Benefits include:

- Getting to spend time marketing product early in the year, before the long work days in the field begin
- Receiving payment early in the season, which can help with the farm's cash flow
- The opportunity to get to know the people who eat the food you grow
- Diversifying sales and marketing opportunities at the local level

If you are thinking about joining a CSA:

- Don't expect all your produce to come from the CSA; they may not grow everything you need
- If you are not used to eating seasonally, do some research
- Quantity varies; it's good to ask up front
- If you want to preserve food for winter, ask (you may be able to get extra supplies)
- Make sure you understand the policies, and shared risk
- Shop around, contact multiple operations when available

Questions to ask your local CSA:

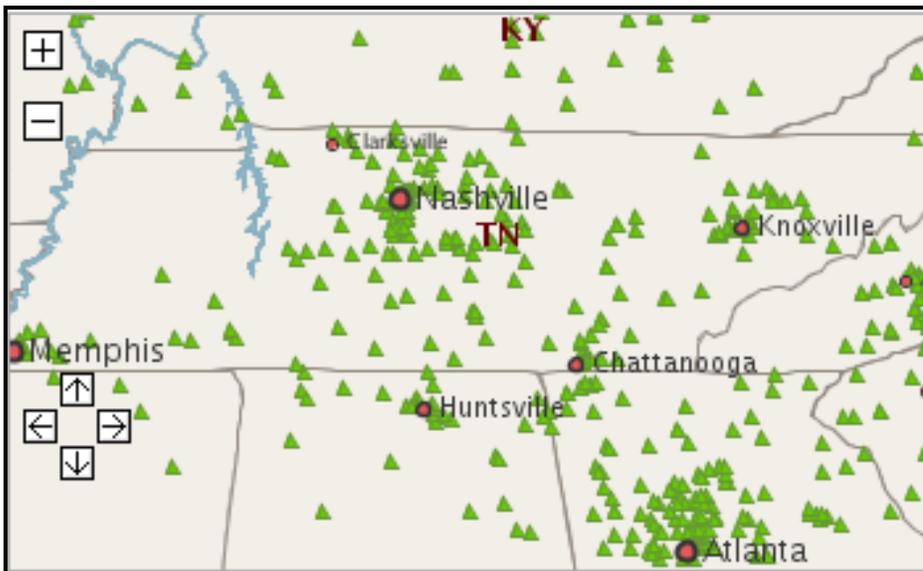
- How long have you been farming?

- How long have you been doing a CSA?
- Are there items in your box grown by other farms, and if so, which farms?
- How did last season go?
- I'd like to talk with a couple of your members before I commit. Could you give me contact info for a couple of "references"?
- What are your CSA policies?

How to find a CSA near you:

CSA originated overseas and later came to the United States in the 1980's. Today there are over 4,000 CSA operations nationwide. All CSA operations may not be registered but the most comprehensive list can be obtained at the "Local Harvest" website: <http://www.localharvest.org/csa/>

Here you can find the CSA nearest you, write reviews, and obtain the most recent information about your local CSA producers.



<http://www.localharvest.org/csa/>

To obtain the information in this article and to learn more about CSA, please visit the **Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food** website: <http://www.usda.gov/wps/portal/usda/knowyourfarmer?navid=KNOWYOURFARMER>

And **Alternative Farming Systems Information Center** website:

<http://www.nal.usda.gov/afsic/pubs/csa/csa.shtml>