

Community-Supported Agriculture in Maryland

To reach different customers as well as provide diversity to a traditional agricultural market, Maryland producers need to develop new and innovative ways of marketing farm products. One successful technique presently being utilized in many northeastern states is the concept of community-based marketing systems or Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA). This system encompasses concepts similar to roadside

markets, the farmer's market system, and door-to-door marketing. The concept is primarily based on mutual risk taking and production support by the farmer and consumer. Although many CSAs use similar marketing concepts, each CSA is organized and operated independently to meet the specific needs of the community that it serves. CSAs can be, and often are community driven and not just farmer driven.



CSA

BENEFITS

- Support of a healthy local economy
- Provide local families with a feeling of control over the products their family members eat
- Building blocks for strong communities through farm and family partnerships
- Connection with the urban community environment
- Provide local families with fresh, affordable food
- Hands-on learning through "working" shares

CSA: The basic premise

CSAs provide a production subscription market system that supplies communities with fresh, affordable produce and other farm products while providing local producers with a cash commitment from customers that allows for a full season of production and profit. With a predetermined, pre-season subscription payment, community families purchase a “share” of a producer’s spring, summer, and early fall harvests. These share families receive a weekly supply of fresh produce during the course of the season. The season may vary from 20 to 33 weeks depending on the producer’s product mix and production timing. Each CSA farm sets prices, product mix to be delivered, and weekly delivery day in addition to pick-up site and schedule arrangements.

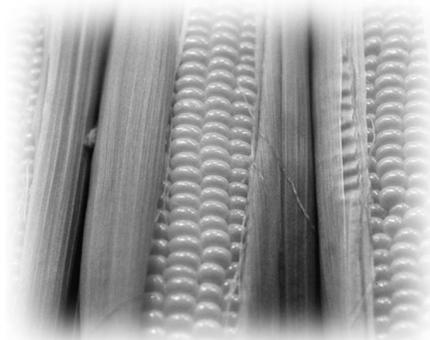
Shared harvest— Shared risks

As community families subscribe for shares, they dedicate themselves as CSA customers for that season’s harvest. On a weekly basis they receive a diverse supply of high quality, fresh produce. In addition they are signing up for that season’s production risks. If the harvest is abundant, they receive the benefits of extra harvest allotments.

If severe weather, insects, disease, or other pests cause declines in production, community subscribers have to

share in these losses in terms of reduced harvest allotments. This phase of the mutual agreement fosters an excellent opportunity for producers to educate urban communities about the risk factors and other issues that relate to food and its production.

In addition to risk sharing, consumers are giving you, the producer of their harvest, a



type of interest-free loan to buy seed, fertilizer and other necessary inputs at the beginning of the production season. The CSA arrangement also provides a guaranteed market for your products.

Benefits of CSA

CSAs provide many benefits. They contribute to a healthy local economy. CSA farms connect farms with the urban and suburban communities. They provide local families with a feeling of control over products their family members eat. CSAs provide local families with fresh affordable food. Building blocks are established through farm and family partnerships. In some cases there is “hands-on” learning through “working” shares.

CSA disadvantages

A disadvantage of CSAs include the detailed decision making process to decide which crops to grow and how to get enough of these crops to satisfy customers. Although labor will be discussed later, it is also a major concern for many CSA farms. Not only is harvest labor a concern but the labor required to fill harvest bags and harvest distribution can be a time-consuming task. Many farmers in CSAs have indicated that record keeping for both state health department and the CSA itself can be a tortious endeavor. Oftentimes apprenticeships and core groups can take care of some labor and infrastructure issues. To avoid many disadvantages, forward thinking and careful planning is a must.

Types of CSAs

As different as Maryland farms are from each other, so are the various types of CSA production and marketing schemes. Two of the more popular plans are **participatory and farmer-directed CSAs**. As the wording implies, the participatory CSA can involve unlimited member participation. Members can help prepare budgets, plan crops to be grown and schedule harvest and distribution arrangements. In some CSAs members can even be involved in the growing and harvesting of crops.

If, however, you are not one for member involvement, a farmer-directed CSA may be

more to your liking. This CSA allows you, the farmer, to decide crops, harvest schedules, and distribution with little or no member participation.

A market survey may indicate that your potential subscription customers will need some payment options. These can include the **direct share payment** where all costs for participation in the program are paid up front. **Long-term installment** utilizes the payment to the farmer over a prescribed time sequence. Sliding scale fees and food stamps options take into account the varied nature of your customers and try to fit a subscription fee into their budgets. Sample payment schedules are listed at the end of this fact sheet.

CSA Production Marketing: Organic vs. IPM

Initially some of the farms that started CSAs in the northeastern states marketed their products through “organic” advertising. During the late 80’s and early 90’s, these farms were successful using this type of marketing because “organic” was in vogue. Today, however, concerns about the increasing price of food and food safety along with other food-related issues have led to a

Participatory CSA

- Working shares
- Shared production
- Local-organization run



Farmer-Directed CSA

- CSA only
- Farm stand plus CSA
- CSA plus farmers market
- CSA and farm tours (agritourism)



Potential Payment Options

- Direct share payment
- Long-term installment plan
- Sliding scale share fee
- Food stamps payment
- Allowing sharers to work off some or all of their share cost either through farm labor or administrative duties

decline in the concern about the need for organically produced foods. Many farmers are using the proven techniques of integrated pest management (IPM) which satisfies both the consumers request for reduced pesticide use and the producer’s duty to supply safe food products. IPM principles, when marketed correctly, can be as dynamic a selling point as organic marketing. Farmers and their CSA customers need to carefully analyze and discuss which production methods are best for their situation.

Labor and Management

Noting the quantity and number of different products harvested and the very narrow window of time in which harvesting must be accomplished, labor availability is an important aspect of CSA management. Many CSAs allow shareowners to work the fields in return for reduced share costs. Other producers plan for this intensive period with pre-arranged hired labor. Another intensive labor time for the CSA is in the distribution of products to shareowners. A system must be in place so that both these processes run smoothly and efficiently. Some CSAs have turned specific harvest times into a celebration event in order to help get the harvest accomplished. These include pumpkin days, pick-your-own-produce days, fruit festivals, farm tours, etc.

Liability and Insurance

Most agricultural operations, including those wanting to start a CSA, need to pre-

pare for the likelihood of accidents, negligence, or contract disputes. Just like any other business, a CSA farm needs to do everything possible to prevent injuries by complying with state laws and regulations, and maintaining a safe environment. This is especially important when allowing the general public onto your farm. Consultation with a liability and insurance specialist is always a good idea.

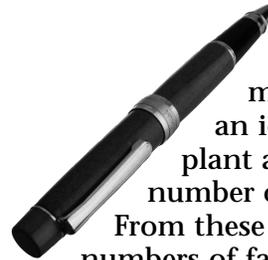
Getting Started

Market assessment: The first major step that must be taken in starting a CSA is to find out who and where your market will come from. As the population increases in Maryland, the urban centers become even more accessible for marketing farm products. A sample survey of the local area to see who may be interested in your CSA and what they will expect from you can save a lot of money and time. This assessment can be individual, family, or community wide. It can be by phone, flyer, or personal visits. There is an example of a one-page flyer that you can use for potential subscribers at the end of this fact sheet.



Farm resource assessment: From your market assessment you can decide if your farm can provide the types and quantities of products their community wants. Creating a sample production plan and harvest schedule will help you decide how many acres and which commodities to plant. Taking an

inventory of your agricultural abilities, and the planting of specific commodities is a personal decision. Include in this assessment equipment needs, labor availability, and natural resources (water availability, pests, soil fertility issues, etc.)



Draw up a proposal:

From the market assessment you should have: 1) an idea of which crops to plant and; 2) an estimate of the number of community subscribers. From these figures, budget specific numbers of families that are needed to recruit for a profitable CSA. A payment plan should also be decided upon so your potential subscribers, as well as you, the farmer, know what monetary commitment to expect and when.

Family share/subscription recruitment:

Spreading the word about your plans for a CSA is very important. This can be done by word of mouth, distribution of leaflets/flyers, and through small group presentations. Free local press coverage is also an option, particularly in areas where CSA is relatively new. Especially successful are health food stores and presentations to civic clubs. Newspapers may also run stories and offer some advertising as a community service.

Set up a community CSA meeting:

Organization of a meeting to potential CSA subscribers will allow you to explain CSAs, show your farm, tell them what they get, when and how. It also gives you the opportunity to discuss the benefits of CSA to the community and personally answer any questions about the CSA. The final item at this meeting is the request for participation.

References/Resources

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Demuth, Suzanne. *Community Supported Agriculture: An Annotated Bibliography and Resource Guide.* Beltsville, MD: National Agriculture Library, 1993.

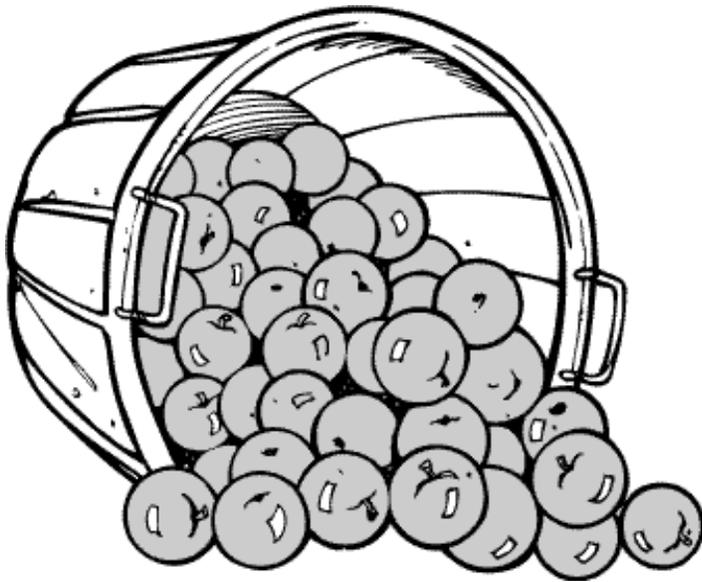
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**What is a CSA? Community-Supported
Agriculture** is a partnership of farmers and consumers for their mutual benefit. For a fixed fee, each subscriber gets a select portion of farmers' crops. CSA subscribers start paying before deliveries are made and must recognize that they are sharing the risk of crop failure with farmers. When nature is generous and farmers are skillful you will share that, too.

Contract and Agreement Schedules:

Potential members will have differing needs when it comes to payment. Listed below are a few samples of schedules that can be adapted to suit your CSA needs. Samples 1 and 2 offer suggestions for the installment and single payment plans. Samples 3 and 4 provide leeway for both use by food stamp recipients and those members who wish to participate by volunteering their labor in return for discounted or reduced payment.

Sample 1 —

Single Payment Schedule

- \$330 Large Share if paid by May 1
- \$340 Large Share if paid by May 15
- \$350 Large Share if paid by May 31

- \$230 Medium Share if paid by May 1
- \$240 Medium Share if paid by May 15
- \$250 Medium Share if paid by May 31

Make checks payable to:

MyMaryland Farm
1 Maryland Road
Anytown, MD 00000-0000

Signature _____

Sample 2 —

Installment Payment Schedule

DUE DATE	HARVEST SIZE	
	ABUNDANT	STANDARD
Dec. 15, 1999	\$78	\$52
Feb. 15, 2000	\$78	\$52
Apr. 15, 2000	\$78	\$52
June 15, 2000	\$78	\$52
Aug. 15, 2000	\$78	\$52
	\$415	\$288

Make checks payable to:

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1 Maryland Road
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Sample 3 —

Food Stamps Combination Payment Schedule

- Whole Share: \$460/year; \$115 deposit and three (3) \$115 installments
- Half Share: \$260/year; \$65 deposit and three (3) \$65 installments
- I will pay with food stamps

Make checks payable to:

MyMaryland Farm
1 Maryland Road
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Sample 4 —

Work Share Combination Payment Schedule

- \$250 Small Share
- \$450 Large Share
- I will volunteer to receive work discount (up to 50% or \$22 per day)
- I will pay with food stamps

Make checks payable to:

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