

Taste: Sharing the wealth with Community Supported Agriculture

There's no easier way to eat your vegetables than by buying a share in Community Supported Agriculture and getting a weekly supply of fresh produce.

By **Rick Nelson**, Star Tribune

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It goes by an awkward name: Community Supported Agriculture. But there's nothing clumsy about the benefits of buying into a CSA farm. Here's how it works: Consumers invest upfront -- generally in the \$300 to \$600 range -- for the promise of the harvest, paid in the form of weekly packages of just-picked produce, delivered during the growing season (typically 18 to 20 weeks) to central drop-off sites. There are as many CSA plans as there are participating farms, which is why we asked a few experts about the ins and outs of buying a farm share.

Catch the wave. "CSAs are definitely a growing trend," said Paul Hugunin, coordinator of the Minnesota Department of Agriculture's Minnesota Grown program. "Our 2008 directory includes 26 CSA farms. Five years ago, there were five. People are starting to say they want to feel a connection to where their food comes from, and a CSA is as close as you can get to farming without actually farming."

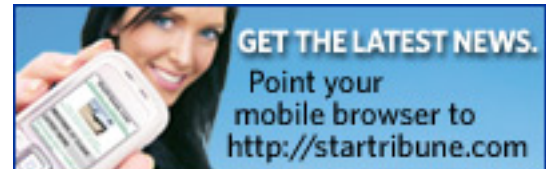
Support your local farmers. "When you buy a CSA

share, you're spending money that stays in the community, supporting your food supply line," said Travis Lusk, produce manager of the Seward Co-op in Minneapolis, which is hosting a CSA fair on April 19 (see story on T5). "It's a way to ensure that you know where your food is coming from; it's safe, it's fresh, and your investment is directly supporting the people who grow your food."

Ask questions. "I definitely recommend going in with an open mind," said Jack Hedin of Featherstone Fruits & Vegetables in Rushford, Minn., an 11-year CSA operation. "There are dozens of really good programs in the Twin Cities, but they are dissimilar in many ways. You need to find the farm that matches your needs best."

Karl Benson, general manager of Cooks of Crocus Hill in St. Paul and Edina, which has hosted a popular crop share program for seven years, agrees, adding these caveats: "One question I always ask is, 'How clean is the produce? Does it come washed, or is it dirty?' That's really good to know upfront. And if you're not a total veggie head, consider splitting your share with a friend or neighbor."

Get your hands dirty. "We require a work day on our farm for our members," said Patty Wright, co-owner of Spring Hill Community Farm in Prairie Farm, Wis. Wright and her husband, Mike Racette, are starting their 17th CSA farming season, and have already sold all of their 150 shares. "It began as an optional piece and evolved into a requirement that was sort of pushed by the members, because they felt it deepened their connection to the farm," she said.



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"We also like it because we get to meet our members and get to know them. That's what brings people back year after year. We feel connected to one another."

Plan accordingly. "This is whole food. It's not packaged or processed," said Brian DeVore, community coordinator for the Land Stewardship Project; he says there are approximately 40 CSA farms serving the Twin Cities metro area and about 1,500 CSA farms nationwide. "This is a whole different ball game. You're going to have to get your head around knowing how to do minimal processing and storage."

"We always make sure to have our refrigerator cleaned out before July, because it's like a train picking up speed; by August that weekly bag from the farm is filled to overflowing. You definitely benefit from the bounty of the land, but it can be overwhelming. It took us three years before we hit it on all cylinders and made efficient use of everything. That's one of the main reasons why people don't sign up for a CSA share the following year, it's because they felt guilty about wasting food."

Take a long view. "That first year is a big learning curve," said Wright. "The second year gives members some perspective. They can anticipate what's coming, they can learn about the resources that it takes to learn how to eat seasonally. We put out a newsletter that talks about what's in the bag that week, how to use it, how to store it; a lot of farms do that. It's important to allow yourself that second year to really understand the kind of time commitment

that a CSA requires."

Change your cooking habits. "Get your hands on one or all of Deborah Madison's cookbooks," said Benson, referring to "Vegetarian Cooking for Everyone," "Local Flavors," "Vegetarian Suppers" and other first-rate titles. "You'll need to be clued in to what you can do with, say, carrots, because during carrot season you're going to be inundated with carrots for four or five weeks."

Enjoy it. "You're going to be taught to eat seasonally, whether you want to or not," said DeVore with a laugh. "It's not like going to the grocery store and buying whatever you like. There are no tomatoes in June, no strawberries in October. But it's fun to go with the flow of the farm, be a part of that learning process, and become acquainted with foods that you might not have thought were available in this area."

Don't delay. "May 1st is getting pretty tight, that's our cutoff," said Hedin, noting that more than 70 percent of his farm's 500 shares are already sold for the 2008 season. "There is so much enthusiasm and curiosity around CSAs," he said. "We continue to get unsolicited inquiries every day. I expect we'll be turning away a lot of prospective buyers."

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