

COMMUNITY SUPPORTED AGRICULTURE

links consumers with producers; provides fresh vegetables, manages risk



Greens are harvested in early July for Shoshone River Farm near Cody.

By Ted Craig

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) systems satisfy two needs – consumer demand for fresh vegetables and producer passion to manage financial risks.

The traditional food system in the United States offers food products often transported long distances to be available for consumers upon demand. The farmer or rancher carries all the risk of crop or animal loss and is at the mercy of commodity buyers on pricing. CSAs, farmers markets, roadside stands, and u-pick-its, bypasses this marketing and distribution system and sells directly to consumers.

Scott Richard of the Shoshone River Farm and CSA, Cody, says his CSA was started to open up one more way to market produce and to increase financial benefits.

“The farm is able to reduce risks by CSA subscriptions that are paid up front,” says Richard. “If we have a catastrophic crop failure, members know there is no refund. If I could, I would have all the farm production dedicated to the CSA.”

What is a CSA?

In a CSA, individuals pledge support to a farm operation and share the risks and benefits of food production.



Scott Richard says the Shoshone River Farm CSA adds another way to market produce and increase financial benefits.

Members or shareholders pledge in advance to cover the anticipated costs of the farm operation and farmer's salary. In return, they receive shares in the farm's bounty throughout the growing season. Members also share in risks, including poor harvests due to unfavorable weather or pests.

"One of the biggest advantages to consumers is fresh-picked produce that day," says Richard. "CSA customers realize a CSA is a cooperative effort, and it enables us to survive as a small farm and be there for them next year. It is a place where like-minded people find each other, share common goals, and socialize. An example of this is we had a wok cooking activity this year. People would bring their own meat and learn how to use a wok to cook with fresh vegetables from the farm."

Members get many more vegetables each week than they may be used to.

"Enough for four people so you can share with other folks who want

farm fresh vegetables as well," he says. "It is a great opportunity for people who want to change their diets and eat healthier."

Two Types of CSAs

CSAs fall into two categories.

1. Subscription CSAs are farmer-driven. The farmer organizes the CSA and makes most management decisions. Farm work is not required of subscribers. A permutation is the farmer cooperative, where two or more farmers organize to produce a variety of products for the CSA basket. About 75 percent of all CSAs in the U.S. are subscription.
2. Shareholder CSAs are consumer-driven. An existing core group organizes subscribers and hires the farmer. The core group may be a not-for-profit organization, and land may be purchased, leased, or rented. The core group makes most key decisions.

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– *Scott Richard*

Both CSA types have prepaid shares that provide working capital. Most CSAs in Wyoming are considered subscription CSAs, but a few shareholder CSAs exist.

CSA Offerings Expand

When first introduced to the United States, CSAs focused on biodynamic or organically grown, fresh and nutritious vegetables. The typical CSA planned on raising 30 or more vegetable varieties in a season, and some provided root crops for winter storage. Most of the share basket vegetables were familiar to the consumer. Some lesser-known offerings that challenged shareholders were also included.

CSAs can now include eggs, cheese, beef, chicken, pork, lamb, flour, breads, jams, jellies, salsa, and wine. This does not mean all CSAs offer multiple food products, as many still sell only vegetables shares.

Wyoming is something of a mixed bag. There are vegetable CSAs, beef CSAs, and those that offer some

combination of vegetables, chicken, beef, lamb or pork. There is also a wine CSA. Wyoming CSAs may be only one producer or a group of producers who have banded together to offer multiple products.

Is a CSA Right for You?

To determine if a CSA is right for your small farm operation, consider the following. Do you have the knowledge of what your land can produce? Do you have the skills, equipment, and water available to produce consistent, good-quality crops that will satisfy your shareholder needs? Are you someone who is willing to open up your operation to intense scrutiny from shareholders? And, lastly, do you have the patience to teach people who may not know much about agriculture or how to cook food from scratch?

A CSA requires commitment, notes Richard.

"For producers, the biggest problem is membership turnover and being ready for the weekly pick up," he says. "On the plus side, my core group has grown each year. Like-minded people want the CSA to be successful. They will often volunteer and participate in the farm production and other activities. There are a lot of opportunities



One of multiple Shoshone River hoop houses.

for them to volunteer, and some jobs don't require much training."

CSA's often start small with as little as three shares. "The first year I had 6 shares, the second 12, and this last year 40," notes Richard.

Every CSA is different and caters to the needs of its community. The farm plan, developed during winter for the next growing season, is the cornerstone of a sustainable CSA. The plan covers the type, varieties, and amount of crops to be grown.

A good farm plan allows producers to develop share prices that reflect all the costs for the coming year and the desired profit. Some Wyoming

CSAs also work cooperatively with one another to supply the needs of their communities with certain crops, meat, eggs, or fruits. Other CSAs offer u-pick-it or reduced costs for a share in exchange for help with farm labor to keep costs lower.

Extend Growing Season

Wyoming has extreme farming conditions. Methods to create additional growing opportunities early in the spring and later in the fall are needed. Existing vegetable CSAs in Wyoming utilize row covers, low tunnels, or high tunnels to extend the growing season to supply fresh vegetables longer.

These techniques allow for varieties that may not have been otherwise able to grow here in abundance.

A "Rural Guide to Community Supported Agriculture in Wyoming and the High Plains" is being developed by the University of Wyoming in cooperation with the Wyoming Department of Agriculture and is due out at the end of this year. The guide will be posted at barnyardsandbackyards.com.

CSAs developed in Europe

Biodynamic farming was developed in Europe in the 1960s from principles originating in the 1920s. Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) was brought to the United States from Switzerland in the mid-1980s, and two CSAs were formed in New England. Not long after, the concept spread across America. By January 2012, there were 4,571 active listings on localharvest.org/. Steven McFadden, co-author of the first book on CSA, *Farms of Tomorrow*, estimates there are between 6,000 and 6,500.

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