



Community Supported Agriculture allows people to buy directly from farms

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METHUEN — For a few hundred dollars a year, people can skip the grocery store and buy shares of the harvest at Pleasant Valley Gardens.

The growing trend, called Community Supported Agriculture, allows people to obtain produce picked just hours earlier.

"We can take people down to the farm here and say, 'This is where it comes from,'" said Dan Mazella, the farm's CSA coordinator.

It costs \$600 for a one-season "full share" membership to the CSA, or \$400 for a "half share." Customers pay ahead of time, and then pick up their food at the farm on a weekly basis from June to October.

"We're not marking it up to Whole Foods price, or even Trader Joe's or Stop & Shop," said Rich Bonanno, owner of Pleasant Valley Gardens.

This summer will be the farm's second season running the CSA. It had 50 people sign up last year after handing out fliers and mentioning the program in newspaper advertisements, and is hoping to attract even more this year.

The harvest consists of lettuce, beets, parsley, squash, zucchini, tomatoes, kale, okra, peppers, cucumbers, eggplant, corn, and melons, among others. People who pay for a full share receive a bushel — 5 to 20 pounds — each week for 20 weeks. People who pay for a half share receive a half bushel.

"It's like a commercial vegetable box overflowing. It's literally a cornucopia," said customer Jeff Oswalt, who signed up with his wife last year and signed up again this year.

The CSA business model allows farms, many of which are struggling financially, to collect money up front at the beginning of the season to pay for seeds, Bonanno said.

Consumers benefit because the food is as fresh as it gets, and they reduce their carbon footprint because the food wasn't shipped cross country. They're also paying close to wholesale prices.

"It cuts out all the marketing. A lot of the refrigeration is cut out, a lot of the packaging," said Dave Dumaresq, owner of Farmer Dave's CSA at 437 Parker Road in Dracut, which delivers food to Groundwork Lawrence's CSA. "All the waste in the system is cut out with the CSA. It's really from field to consumer in as direct a way as possible."

However, customers do take a risk by spending their money in advance without knowing how the growing season will shape up. Despite that, Oswalt was happy with last year's results.

"Even with all the rain and all the problems that all the farmers had, we're delighted with all the stuff," he said.

At one point last year, Oswalt had more vegetables than he and his family could eat, so he shared them with his neighbors. Still, he said the CSA is a great buy.

"It's less than 20 bucks a week when you sit down and figure it out," he said. "You're going to spend a hell of a lot more than that going to the grocery store — even Market Basket or Walmart."

Oswalt, 56, is a stay-at-home dad who lives about a mile from Pleasant Valley Gardens and does all of the cooking in his house. But Dumaresq said CSAs aren't for everybody.

"People that don't like to cook or don't like vegetables, obviously the CSA isn't for them," he said.

Pleasant Valley Gardens supplies produce to grocery store chains, and sells plants and flowers to people who show up at its site at 255 Merrimack St. It wanted to enter the retail business, but didn't want to open a farm stand, Bonanno said.

"Our foray into retail is going to be the CSA for the foreseeable future," he said.

CSAs originated in Europe a few decades ago, before catching on in Western Massachusetts, Bonanno said.

"It started with a lot of small organic farmers that didn't have a lot of borrowing power," he said.

Dumaresq has been operating his CSA since 2007, the year after he bought his farm and needed a secure income base. He had 62 members the first year, 320 the second and 440 last year, he said.

He uses customer feedback to determine what to grow more of and what to grow less of. Tomatoes are the most popular item, he said.

Dumaresq is offering a winter share of root crops — such as potatoes, onions, and carrots — for the first time this November and December.

"Kind of like the diehards," he said.

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Photos



Angie Beaulieu/Staff photo. Richard Bonanno walks through a greenhouse of early vegetable transplants at Pleasant Valley Gardens in Methuen. The farm has a CSA, or Community Supported Agriculture, program that supplies a share of crops to customers on a weekly basis for near-wholesale costs. Staff Photographer