

## Who's Your Farmer?

A recent deliciously warm March evening found me on a farmer-friend's porch, praising trays full of tiny, fresh seedlings, nostalgic for a not-so-long-ago time when I was a farmer too. March was a month of watching the sky for sun-breaks, squeezing lumps of soil to test for wetness and tilling opportunities, cheering the first bent onions and microscopic lettuces to poke up in the greenhouse, and hearing from the farm's 130 members who eagerly awaited their first box of produce.

Those 130 members – many loyal regulars, some brand-new each season – were the reason we could spend March watching the sky and the rest of the season focusing on the art and science of growing food. Our Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program allowed us to be farmers instead of salespeople – and I don't know many farmers who love marketing! I cherish the CSA concept; as an innovative marketing model for small farms, as a creative, educational and delicious way to get fed, and as one part of the solution to the global food system's troubling economic, environmental and social issues.

Though programs vary widely in the details, a typical CSA arrangement involves a flat fee paid to the farmer at the beginning of the growing season, which entitles each "member" or "shareholder" to a share of the farm's bounty for the season. In most arrangements, the season is about 22 weeks long, mid-May to mid-October, and a "share" consists of a weekly box, bag or basket bursting with a seasonal selection of incomparably fresh produce. Most CSA farms deliver shares to central locations for pickup and provide

newsletters, recipes, tips on using unfamiliar veggies, and farm updates as the season unfolds. This arrangement provides crucial capital to the farm for the seeds, supplies and labor of spring, which one Whatcom County CSA estimates can cost \$15-20,000 before any other income rolls in. It's a way for eaters to connect directly to their food supply, support a local farm, and eat like royalty for a season.

"It's like Christmas every week!" is a common refrain heard by CSA farmers from enthusiastic members. Opening a damp box to find tender, succulent arugula and boc choy in the spring, cool cucumbers and bursting tomatoes in the summer, and fall's richly sweet winter squash is a delight to the senses. Some CSA programs stick to "comfort" foods, those staples that members will recognize and know how to use. Others seek to stretch their members' palates further, with underappreciated vegetables like kohlrabi (a crunchy, sweet relative of broccoli) and celeriac (a flavorful root version of celery), unusual herbs, and heirloom varieties not found on any supermarket shelves, providing a culinary experience that cannot be replicated. Some include fruit and berries, flowers, eggs, meat or other farm goodies.

Other variables among CSA operations include the cost and size of the share, delivery days and locations, length of the season, and payment options. Many allow payments to be made in installments, and several offer opportunities for "working shares" in lieu of all or part of the share cost. CSA typically offers a very good return on investment, if one compares the value of each box with sticker prices at the Farmers Market, Co-op or any other grocer. Besides good value, the combination of quality, quantity and experience is priceless.

An element of risk is inherent in any sort of shareholder investment. Stock prices fluctuate, interest rates vary, and some seasons yield bumper crops while pests, weather and a myriad of variables get the best of the most skilled, earnest and hardworking farmer at times. The element of shared risk is one of the things I love most about CSA; it makes the production of food feel like the high-priority community endeavor it ought to be, and that the community values the farm highly enough to support it through thick and thin. The support of our members when our potato crop was severely damaged by flea beetles one year – one member exclaimed, “We’d rather have your ugly potatoes than perfect ones from the store!” – exemplified the heart of the CSA movement. *Community Supported Agriculture*, a sharp contrast to overall trends in American agriculture.

Some estimates say that fresh produce travels an average of about 1500 miles to our plates. Others tell the story of the “food dollar;” of a typical dollar spent on food in America, only about 13 cents will reach the farmer. Meanwhile, Americans spend a smaller percentage (about 10%) of their income on food than any other country. Rock-bottom prices, convenience, choice, uniformity and unseasonable availability have become the expectation of consumers in the produce aisle, and come at high economic, environmental and social cost. CSA presents a great alternative.

There are 8 farms offering CSA programs in Whatcom County and 3 in Skagit County this season, and most of them do anticipate filling up, so call around soon to find the CSA that’s right for you!

#### Whatcom County:

Cedarville Farm (360) 592-5594  
K&M Red River Farm (360) 758-2919  
Nooksack Valley CSA – Harmony Farms (360) 201-1491  
Rosa Verde Farm (360) 383-0893  
RedTail Farm (360) 592-8027  
Holistic Homestead (360) 303-3711  
Double Rainbow Farms (360) 303-1391  
Wake Robin Farm (360) 383-0061

#### Skagit County:

Riversong Farm (360) 424-1999  
Hedlin Farms (360) 466-3977  
Lake Cavanaugh Farm (360) 422-7706

*For more details about each farm’s CSA program, call the farm, see the April newsletter of the Community Food Co-op or call (360) 647-6902 for a copy of the 2006 Whatcom Farm Map & Guide!*

Shonie Schlotzhauer is an Americorps VISTA with Sustainable Connections’ Food & Farming program, recently heralding from Common Ground Farm in Thurston County.

*Sustainable Connections is a business network in NW Washington establishing and supporting a local living economy that sustains itself, our community, and a healthy environment – now with almost 500 members! Learn more about their programs and how you can join by visiting [www.sconnect.org](http://www.sconnect.org).*