

Tips for joining a CSA

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Community-supported agriculture isn't just for summer -- before signing up, check out these helpful ideas

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Fulton Center's College Farmer, Sarah Bay, prepares for a CSA pickup. (Fulton Center photo)

Community-supported agriculture, or CSAs, has become a popular way to buy produce, and the concept has expanded beyond just fresh fruits and vegetables to livestock, fish, fiber and just about anything else that can be grown.

But just because something's popular doesn't mean it's good for everyone. People who are interested in joining a CSA should definitely do their research before signing up, say agricultural experts.

CSAs came to the U.S. in the late 1980s, influenced by Japanese and European farming practices, said Christine Mayer, program manager for the Fulton Center for Sustainable Living at Wilson College. The center has run its own CSA for 17 years.

Those farming practices sought a closer relationship between farmers and the community, as it was prior to the rise of industrial agriculture, said Ryan Galt, associate professor in the department of human ecology at the University of California at Davis who studies CSAs.

The way most CSAs in the U.S. work now is like a "subscription for vegetables," Mayer said. The popularity of the subscription-based model helped to move it from being available during just the growing season to include products

that are available year-round, such as meat, Mayer said. That means CSAs aren't limited to just summer, but that is when they're most abundant. Many of the summer produce CSAs are weekly, but the non-vegetable ones might be monthly subscriptions.

The big draw for CSA members remains knowing where the food comes from, Mayer and Galt said.

CSAs are for people who like to cook or who want to learn to cook, they added. Picky eaters probably shouldn't apply.

"Part of our work is educating our shareholders that there is more than just carrots and potatoes out there. Folks who are interested in exploring different kinds of food, folks who are willing to take risks in the kitchen and folks who have time to research those vegetables or fruits (will like CSAs). But if you're someone who is on a tight schedule, or doesn't like to cook, I don't recommend it," Mayer said.

Galt said CSAs are also popular with parents who want to encourage their young children to eat more vegetables. "We've heard some people say when the box gets delivered, it's almost like Christmas. The kids unpack it and they get very excited," he said.

Both Galt and Mayer said people who are considering a CSA need to understand that having a connection to a local farmer is not the same as shopping at a grocer.

Many CSAs require payment upfront. If the CSA runs from spring to summer to fall, the cost to join could be as much as a few hundred dollars before the first lettuce leaf arrives. That's because most farmers need money to start the season, Mayer said.

In the growing season, the farmer delivers whatever is ripe at the time, so don't expect peppers in April or asparagus in September. Both Galt and Mayer said joining a CSA is like becoming a member or a shareholder in the farm for that year.

"As part of the farm, it kind of changes the expectations. You share in the risks as well as the reward," Mayer said.

Begin a search for a CSA by digging online. The Fulton Center has a nationwide database as does Local Harvest at <http://www.localharvest.com>.

Farmers' markets are a place to meet growers face-to-face. Mayer recommended not only interviewing the farmer, but asking for references of current members.

Galt suggested making a list of priorities to ask the farmer. He recommends asking about growing practices and how they treat farm workers. Not all CSAs are organic, Mayer said. "Nothing says they have to be," she added.

Since harvest shortfalls are possible, ask if the farmer buys from others to supplement. "That may or may not be important for people. Some farms do outsource. Folks can decide if that's important or not to them," she said.

Galt said it's also worth asking how the farm is doing financially.

"It's hard to ask because it's not a normal conversation topic in the U.S.," he said, adding that the point of CSAs in the beginning was the community figuring out how to help small farmers survive.

"Farming is extremely difficult on all ends," Galt said.