

It's easier to 'eat locally' with Community Supported Agriculture

PORTAGE PARK DISTRICT FOUNDATION

"Eating locally" is a movement that has spread to Portage County. Along with the growing popularity of farmers' markets is the establishment of Community Supported Agriculture, or CSAs, a unique method of connecting health-conscious consumers with local foods resources.

As the owner of Birdsong Farm in Hiram Township, a certified organic vegetable, herb and flower farm, I have a business plan that involves direct marketing to the consumer, which for most of my career has meant farmers' markets. I love farmers' markets and believe they are a vital link to local foods as well as an important revenue source for farmers. The CSA takes this direct link to consumers a few steps further.

A CSA program works like a subscription service. The farmer decides on a number of "shares" to sell for a season and on a price for those shares. A share is an allotment of produce or farm goods that is usually distributed weekly for the length of the season.

For example, my CSA runs from about the first of June through Halloween and again from the first of November through Christmas. Each week during those times the CSA members receive a box of freshly-picked, organic produce of whatever varieties are ripe and ready at that time. A typical box will contain anywhere from eight to 12 different items each week.

This program works for both farmer and CSA members in a number of ways. Customer sign-up season for a CSA is usually in the winter or early spring, with shares are paid for at that time. This upfront income can give a farmer a sense of security and allow for planning and payment of spring planting costs. The member benefits from participating in the farm not only by receiving fruits and vegetables but by really becoming a part of the process.

At Birdsong Farm I have updates on my website as well as weekly e-mailings to keep members aware of crops that are ready for harvest and other farm-related events. My customers enjoy feeling connected to where their food is grown, how, and by whom. Many report paying renewed atten-

GREEN PORTAGE

Matt Herbruck



tion to things such as the weather and the change of the seasons because they are actually invested in the cycle of food production on my farm. Also, it's customary that in times of bounty the shares are actually larger in value than what the member has paid for in dollars. In this way I can thank the members for their investment and their trust in me.

You can find out more about CSAs in this area as well as other local foods resources at www.localharvest.org. Another resource is OEFFA's website: www.OEFFA.org. This is the agency that certifies us as organic producers. My own website is birdsongfarmohio.com.

The direct marketing of local foods whether at farmers' markets, farm stands, or through programs like CSA is really about building relationships between farmers and customers. The local foods movement is strong and growing in part because people are increasingly taking an interest in what they eat and where it comes from. The freshest and most nutritious foods are grown close to home.

Since relocating here from Maine three years ago, I have been so pleased by the support that local and organic foods and farmers receive here in Ohio. I have seen the Haymaker Farmers' Market in Kent grow enormously in just the few seasons I have been a member. My CSA books up very quickly each year.

I am humbled and proud to be one of your farmers. Together, whether through a CSA or at a farmers' market, we can all work for a healthier and more sustainable food system.

Matt Herbruck has been an organic farmer for 17 years. His Birdsong Farm is in Hiram Township. Green Portage is a monthly feature of the Record-Courier in cooperation with the Portage Park District.

OPINION

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