

Sharing the Bounty

Community Supported Agriculture farms—CSAs—make for a perfect partnership between growers and consumers

by Lisa Oram

On one of the few blessed sunny days in early June this year, the Saito family of Florence was at Riverland Farm in Sunderland, picking strawberries. The half-dollar sized berries—billed on a chalkboard in the farm shop as the “first strawberries in the Valley”—seemed like a miracle after this year’s deep and hard winter and the soggy spring that followed.

Loran Saito and her sons, Liam and Evan, crouched in the hay mulch between rows and rooted under strawberry leaves to find and pluck berries. Max Saito looked on, holding daughter May in his arms and feeding her, and himself, a berry or two.

The Saitos are experienced in this task, and in the harvesting of peas and green beans, too. As shareholders of Riverland Farm, they are entitled to a weekly portion of the harvest from early June through late October, including some crops they can pick themselves. On that first day of strawberries, the allotment was “just a handful,” and though soon there would be abundance, right then each precious berry was a decision.

Riverland Farm and the Saito family are part of a movement known as Community Supported Agriculture (CSA). The concept is simple: Participating farmers sell shares of their harvest to interested neighbors before a single seed is in the ground.

Community members sign on to support the farm by paying up front, when the farmers most need the cash. Shares in local CSAs can cost from \$300 to \$500 and usually provide enough produce to feed two to four people for up to half the year.

It’s an investment that increasing numbers of area consumers appear willing to make. This year’s shares at Brookfield Farm in Amherst, the area’s oldest CSA, sold out two months earlier than ever before. Dan Kaplan, Brookfield’s farmer, offers this theory: “When things are booming, it’s champagne, cigars and caviar. When things go south [economically speaking] it’s potatoes and onions.”

Farmers and consumers forge a unique relationship based on shared benefits and risks. This summer, with lettuce and spinach the best they’ve been in years, CSA members are enjoying the extra bounty; conversely, if the sweet potatoes fail or rain washes out the broccoli seeds, the shareholders will get less—and no refund. The variety of crops generally protects shareholders from any great loss, food-wise; likewise, the number of shareholders protects farmers from the kinds of financial losses they could be subject to in more traditional farming.

At most CSAs, shareholders are encouraged to get their hands dirty at farm workdays or other volunteer opportunities when the farmers need help. The connections between grower, consumer and the land are meant to be deep. Members of the community are investing not only in fresh, healthy produce for their dinner tables, but in sustaining small-scale local farms. Along the way, open space is preserved and people of all ages get a vivid reminder that food needn’t come only from boxes.

THE PIONEER VALLEY is a fertile spot, distinguished not only by Hadley asparagus and sweet corn, but by the number and variety of CSA farms. It’s been less than 20 years since the first CSA started in the United States (right down the road in South Egremont—see box on Page 9), and since then at least 10 CSAs have sprouted locally.

The largest CSA in the area, with over 600 shareholders, is the Food Bank Farm in Hadley. As a program of the Food Bank of Western Massachusetts for the past 12 years, it gives away half of what it grows to those in need. “Efficiency and economies of scale allow us to be competitively priced for shareholders and still meet our social mission,” says Michael Docter, farmer at the Food Bank Farm since its beginning.

Another longtime local CSA is Brookfield Farm in Amherst, 17 years old and providing food for 520 shareholders. This season, Brookfield expects to break ground for a new barn, which Dan Kaplan, its farmer for 11 years, sees as the “final, solidifying element” of the farm’s place in the community.

And at Hampshire College in Amherst, there’s been a CSA especially tailored to the needs of academics since 1992. Its distribution season runs from September to December only, yet it still provides 30 crops to 200 shareholders.

Alongside these established farms, new CSA farms continue to appear. Here is a look at the workings of some of these newcomers. Riverland Farm, Sunderland

When the Saito family, who have been members of Riverland Farm on River Road in Sunderland for three years, pulled up at the farm shop on opening day, June 3, they felt like they were coming home. “I’ve been missing the farm,” Liam, 6, said. “We haven’t been here in a long time.”

“We feel like this is our farm,” said Loran Saito.

Although there are farm stands and even other CSAs closer to their home, they feel a loyalty to Scott Reed and Ferdene Chin-Yee, the farmers at Riverland since its beginning six years ago. “Scott and Ferdene are really welcoming,” Max Saito says. “They trust us to walk around the fields and take the right amount. I feel comfortable and enjoy my sense of responsibility in the farm.”

Despite the drive from Florence to Sunderland, Max and Loran say they rarely miss their weekly trip to the farm. A few times last year, one or the other showed up alone, intending to pick up the produce and hurry on home. They quickly realized that just wasn't the way to do it.

They have made friends at the farm, people they don't see anywhere else but with whom they share a connection. The kids have made friends, too, especially with Bindu and Salsa, goats whose only job is to be pets for the children. Going to the farm is a family outing, as much a summer staple as riding bikes or swimming. And when the season changes, the Saitos and the other 100 or so shareholders at Riverland are still enjoying lettuce and cooking greens, beets, turnips, cauliflower, broccoli, winter squash and more from their weekly distribution, which extends well into the fall

“Food is the driver at our farm,” Scott Reed explained, standing among the bins of lettuce and green garlic which were part of the day's distribution along with the strawberries. “We like to grow it, eat it and share it.”

Reed and Chin-Yee were apprentices at the Food Bank Farm for three years. They now farm five acres directly behind their farm shop. Like most CSA farms, Riverland Farm grows all its produce using sustainable, organic methods: The farm practices crop rotation and soil-building techniques without using chemical fertilizers, pesticides or herbicides.

With no need to transport vegetables over long distances, Reed and Chin-Yee select what they grow based on taste and suitability for their soils. When shareholders arrive at the farm stand on Tuesday or Friday afternoons, they pick up produce that was harvested no more than 24 hours earlier, and often just that morning.

“CSAs are a real win-win situation,” said farm manager Ryan Cohen as he was meeting the shareholders for the first time in June. He came to Riverland Farm after running a CSA farm in the Atlanta area for five years.

“The farmers and the customers inspire each other,” Cohen said. “This work is exciting because it's always evolving.”
—Red Fire Farm, Granby

Twenty-five-year-old Ryan Voiland, the farmer at Red Fire Farm on Carver Street in Granby, has been growing organic vegetables for more than half his life. Even before he had a driver's license, his parents dropped him off at the Greenfield farmers market to sell produce from his home garden in Montague.

“He was always entrepreneurial,” Paul Voiland said of his son. “This is how it all started: One year, after I gave him some extra pumpkins I'd grown to sell in front of the house, he came to me and said, 'You know, if you did this right, you could have food to sell all summer, not just at the end.' So, he kicked me out of my garden and did it better.”

First Voiland added a greenhouse. Then, in high school, he rented a larger parcel of land in Montague and began the Old Depot Gardens as his summer work. He went on to study agriculture at Cornell University in New York, but kept the gardens running, e-mailing instructions to his parents about what to plant in the early spring and traveling home on the weekends to tend to the operation.

Within six months of graduating from college, Voiland purchased land in Granby as a permanent home for his business. He named his venture Red Fire Farm, in memory of a 1922 fire which destroyed the property's original house and barn, owned by the Hatch/Lyman family, and for Red Fire lettuce, one of his favorite varieties. The farm has been up and running since 2001.

“I've been with this farm since the beginning,” said Ingrid Edstrom of South Hadley in late June at the first of several potluck picnics Voiland and his crew of four apprentices will host for shareholders throughout the summer. “Coming here is like a religious experience,” Edstrom continued. “I like to listen to the crickets, smell the hay, think about snap peas.”

As a nurse practitioner, Edstrom is drawn to the health benefits of organic food. She is working this summer with a group of handicapped people attending summer camp at the Berkshire Hills Music Academy in South Hadley and has arranged with Voiland to bring them to the farm. “They may be inspired to eat better if they understand more about where healthy food comes from, if they get personally involved with it,” Edstrom says.

At this first potluck, Voiland led folks on a tour of the fields. For shareholders like Robin and Glen Horrigan of the Forest Park section of Springfield, who receive their weekly share packed in a box and delivered to the Springfield farmers market, it was their first visit to the farm. Their son, Jackson, 5, pulled a carrot from the ground but was unsure about eating it.

“It's dirty,” he said, scrunching up his nose.

“Where did it come from?” his mother prompted. His father took a bite and Jackson followed suit, sharing a nibble with sister Sofie, 2.

“I grew up romping in the tobacco fields of Westfield,” Glen Horrigan said.

“I'm glad my kids can also get an experience with agriculture.”

Red Fire Farm delivers weekly to CSA members at drop-off points in Longmeadow, Springfield and Montague. In addition, it provides about half the produce to Common Wealth CSA, a collective of six farmers who distribute their goods once a

week in back of Green Fields Market in Greenfield. "I was involved with this group before Red Fire and I like keeping in touch," Voiland said. "They're nice folks."

Voiland also markets his produce in Hampden, Hampshire and Franklin counties via two farm stands, two farmers markets and several retail and restaurant accounts. "We still run Ryan's farm stand in Montague. We'd have to leave town if we shut it down," his father said.

At the potluck, Voiland served organic pizzas donated by Hillside Pizza in Greenfield. He said he is talking to the business's owners about how Hillside might use the CSA to sell its pizzas.

In addition to the potlucks, Red Fire Farm will host its annual tomato festival in August. Voiland grows over 60 varieties and has won top prizes at state competitions for the past five years.

"When I look at our society and agriculture system," Voiland says, "I think we really need to make changes in how food is grown in this county. We have a very centralized, industrial system for the most part. I like to see more local production and regional food security. And I like the idea of keeping our agricultural heritage in New England and other parts of the country. Part of it is figuring out how farmers can afford to spend their time doing it." The CSA approach is one answer, he says.

Though he says farming is still a financial struggle, Voiland has lofty dreams, like planting a fruit orchard on a part of his hilly land that lies beyond a beaver pond. He says he hopes he can save some land he currently leases from being developed when the lease ends in two years.

"I've taken a lot of risk to get into farming at such a young age," Voiland says. "I'd like to be an advocate for how young people can farm. I see a lot of interest—I get tons of applicants for apprenticeships each year. I'm trying to set an example of how that can work." —Ol' Turtle Farm, Easthampton

From the fields of Ol' Turtle Farm, the top of Mount Tom looms in the south; on the other three sides of the rectangular parcel, thick trees and conservation land hide homes that sit, in reality, not so far away. Tucked into a residential spot on East Street, the 12-acre farm feels like a small retreat.

Owner Eileen Droescher, a former teacher and businessperson who has run Ol' Turtle since 1998, invites shareholders to participate wholeheartedly in the farm.

"We want to develop a community that supports not only the farm, but one another," Droescher said to about a hundred people huddled over cups of hot cider in the barn at a Memorial Day weekend tour and orientation. "We want to identify resources among and within us, use each others' services, share our interests."

She encourages that in a variety of ways. Ol' Turtle's distribution barn, also known as the Far Barn, features a bulletin board

labeled Turtle Talk. Droescher invites members to post their business cards and other items of interest on it.

At the orientation meeting, one Ol' Turtle member solicited parents of young children to form a "pick and play group." The idea was that adults would care for the kids while others picked; then they'd switch.

Last year, a group of shareholders made popsicles and ice-cream sandwiches and sold them to raise enough money for a sandbox at the farm.

Droescher solicits feedback from members at the end of each season. This year, per shareholder request, the pick-your-own hours have been expanded. Responding to other requests, Droescher wrote in the farm newsletter that corn will never be grown at Ol' Turtle. "We would have to give up a lot of other crops to free enough land to grow corn. Corn is also a very heavy feeder and takes a lot out of the soil. It is also very difficult to manage without the use of herbicides."

The crew at Ol' Turtle Farm this year includes David Schein, an apprentice in 1999, the farm's first season. After spending the interim years working with computers in Boston, Schein and his wife have returned to the Pioneer Valley. Lisa Argersinger, a yoga teacher in the winters, is in her third season of working on the farm.

Droescher and her crew have scheduled three discussion groups this season so that members can share information. In June, they talked about what to do with all the leafy vegetables then in season; in July, it's a recipe swap; and in September, they'll learn about storing and preserving food for the winter.

This season the newly renovated Far Barn offers an expanded selection of other locally produced foods, including bread from the El Jardin bakery, part of a community development initiative run by low-income people in Holyoke. El Jardin bread is sold at other CSAs as well, including Brookfield Farm, Riverland Farm and the Food Bank Farm.

Droescher named the farm Ol' Turtle after a beloved children's book by that name, as well as her own affinity for the animals. Turtles, she says, "walk gently on the Earth and live a long time because they are in harmony with Mother Nature."

The first spring on the farm, after the name had been chosen, Droescher found a turtle that had built a nest in the field and laid eight eggs—a sign, she says, that she'd chosen a fitting name for her farm. Natural Roots, Conway

On June 3, the first day of distribution at Natural Roots CSA, there was little that could be done about the muddy area just in front of the shack where food is picked up. The rustic, three-sided building sits adjacent to the vegetable washing station, and the combination of weather and washing had left a few puddles. Although farmer David Fisher wished out loud that it could have been more comfortable for the shareholders, the folks who showed up that day didn't seem to mind.

John Nawrocki of Ashfield arrived 15 minutes before the distribution officially started, anxious to inaugurate his first season as a member.

Stopping in on his way home from work in South Deerfield, he said he had joined, in part, because he liked encouraging people to farm for the local population.

Soon after, three women with babies gathered to admire the infants who had last visited the farm in utero.

Jill Podell of Deerfield and her daughter, Olivia, arrived next. Podell took in a deep breath of the fresh air while Olivia jumped on top of the chest freezer to help Anna Maclay, Fisher's partner and the other farmer at Natural Roots, decorate the chalkboard that provides the week's instructions. After erasing last year's farewell message, Maclay wrote down the first message of the new season: Each member should take 1 pound each of mesclun mix and spinach, and one bunch each of radishes and arugula. Olivia drew flowers around the border and Fisher greeted shareholders, saying that once the season got into full swing, there would no longer be per-item pound limits on what they could take; instead, they could mix and match to fill their Natural Roots canvas tote bags.

Fisher, who like most CSA farmers lives on the farm he works, has been renting land from South River Farm on Shelburne Falls Road for the past five years. He had gardened in the Seattle area before coming East to apprentice on horse-powered farms in Maine and New York. Three years ago he started Natural Roots CSA.

His brochure states its mission: "Life is sacred. It is with a reverence for all living things that we aim to raise every plant and animal on the farm in optimal health and vitality."

The farm uses no chemicals, Fisher says. "Food is such a basic part of everyone's life; it just doesn't make sense that it should be contaminated by chemicals that are designed to kill things."

He uses horse power and other "live energy" in place of tractors and fossil-fuel-burning equipment on the farm. Two massive Belgian workhorses named Bobby and Jerry pull the plows, cultivators and other antique equipment that Fisher manages to find; his most recent acquisition, a riding cultivator, came from an Amish farm in Pennsylvania.

The farm also has what Fisher calls a "hog composting facility." Manure from the horse stalls is cleaned out several times a day and dumped into the pigpens, where it's mixed with hay. To feed the farm's three pigs Fisher pokes a hole into the manure bed and pours the grain down the hole. When the pigs root for their food, they turn the compost in the process.

Natural Roots sold 55 shares this year, an increase of 10 over last year, and had to turn people away. In addition to Fisher and Maclay, there are two apprentices, making the largest crew to date.

Alex Brunette, an apprentice from San Francisco, says he shopped around before settling on where he wanted to spend this season. He was drawn to western Massachusetts by CRAFT (Collaborative Regional Alliance for Farmer Training), a cooperative effort of organic farms in the region that have organized to provide educational opportunities for new workers. Every other week from April to October, apprentices gather at one farm for a visit and often a hands-on workshop as well.

"You get the whole story on the farm," Brunette says. "You can ask any questions you want. The farmers have been very open about everything, even the finances. Anything."

As shareholders signed in and said their hellos on opening day, Fisher greeted many with hugs. Shareholder Emily Millspaugh of Easthampton says she doesn't know exactly what it is, but Fisher's food is different. "David's carrots aren't just carrots," she says, "They're CARROTS."

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