by Elizabeth Weise, *USA TODAY*

A new way of farming is quietly sowing seeds of change. It has brought new life to family farms in Illinois, let city dwellers cultivate deep relationships with the people who grow their food in Rochester, N.Y., and allowed new farms to sprout up in Tulsa. The ultimate harvest may be the preservation of the family farm.

Community-supported agriculture - CSA - has grown from a few pioneers in the late 1980s to as many as 1,700 farms that feed about 340,000 families a week, according to Local Harvest, a Santa Cruz, Calif.-based Web site that tracks CSAs and farmers markets.

Here's how it works: For $13 to $25 a week, a family buys a share of a nearby farm's yearly harvest. Each week the family gets a box of vegetables - and, at some CSAs, fruit - either delivered to the house or a designated drop-off point. Though CSA farmers take their shareholders' likes and dislikes into consideration when they're buying seed, once it's in the ground, there's no changing the menu. What's ripe is ripe, and that's what's in the box.

The number of CSA operations is only a tiny fraction of the 2.1 million U.S. farms counted in the 2002 Census of Agriculture. But they represent a new way of keeping small farmers on the land in an era of agricultural consolidation. Every year, CSA farmers figure out how many shares their harvest can support - anywhere from 25 to 1,000. Once those are all spoken for, the CSA is sold out until the following year.

LOCATING A CSA FARM

Local Harvest http://www.localharvest.org/

Robyn Van En Center for CSA Resources
National CSA Farm Directory http://www.csacenter.org/

Jim and Diann Moore were on the verge of losing their nearly 100-year-old farm in Watseka, Ill., when the Prairieland CSA in Champaign-Urbana came looking for a new farmer in 2003. "My husband was working road construction, I was working in a grocery store (and) we'd spent our boys' savings accounts," Diann Moore says.

Then in December, the CSA checks started to come from the group's 60 members. "It's been a lifeline," she says with a catch in her voice. "Spring is when we need the money. It's when we buy the seeds. It's there when the propane bill comes for the greenhouses."

Farmers often have had to take out loans at the beginning of the growing season and pay the money back with interest when the crops come in. But CSAs turn that age-old pattern on its head.

"I get my money upfront," says Leigh Hauter, who has run a CSA out of his family's Bull Run Mountain Organic Farm in The Plains, Va., for 12 years. "With the CSA, people join up in the spring, and that pays our expenses."

CSA shareholders pay in advance. Some pay monthly; others pay for the season with one check. Either way, the money's in the farmer's bank account when it's needed.

Today the Moores' farm has 143 members who each pay $405 for 33 weeks of vegetables. Though Moore says the family income "is still probably below the poverty line," they're earning enough that they've been able to quit their off-farm jobs. Best of all, their oldest son, Wes, 17, will get his wish and be able to farm with his family when he finishes school instead of leaving for a job in town.

The Moores feel blessed to have their shareholders, who have become like family. "We get Christmas cards. We've gone to people's funerals. If it weren't for this group of people, we wouldn't still be farming," Moore says.

'Rude awakening' for some

Not that CSAs are right for every farmer, says Greg Bowman, editor of NewFarm.org, a Web magazine.

"It's been rather a rude awakening for some farmers, going from selling by the ton at a local feed mill to growing things by the pound for people who believe they have a stake in deciding what you're going to grow," he says.

But when it works, it's great for both sides, says Kathryn Jensen of Rochester, N.Y. She has been a shareholder in Peacework Farm for 10 years and says she's in tune with the seasons and the struggles of "her" farmers. "Supermarkets have almost completely isolated the consumer from the natural food production cycle," she says.

And that's why CSAs are "a revolution in agriculture," says David Ward, director of the Rodale Institute, a non-profit educational and research organization in Kutztown, Pa., that works to promote sustainable farming.

"Just the act of going and picking up a box puts the consumer much more into the mind-set of 'Where is this food coming from?' and 'Why is it available now?' "

It has been a huge shift in the Jensen household. Her sons now know that asparagus is available in the spring and strawberries in the summer, and neither will be on the table in December. They're also much more adventuresome eaters, she says. "My older son, who's 10, loves kale, collard greens and Brussels sprouts," she says. "I tell people that and they're floored."

Donna Camp joined the Moores' CSA a year ago. It has taken her Urbana, Ill., family a while to get used to eating things she didn't know existed before, such as the green, knobby ball called kohlrabi, a mild member of the broccoli family.

"We didn't know that cabbage could taste that good," Camp says. "It's really made us

question what we have been eating before."

An idea is born

The CSA movement got its start in the USA in 1986 from farmers who had spent time on Swiss and German organic farms. In those countries, the idea of producer-consumer alliances was inspired by the co-op movement in Chile in the 1970s. The first CSA farms in America were the Great Barrington CSA Garden in Massachusetts and Temple-Wilton Community Farm in New Hampshire.

Today, not all CSAs are alike. There are farms on which the shareholders work a certain number of hours each season. And there are others in which shareholders just leave the farmer a house key so a driver can drop off the food.

The harvest itself is growing more varied. CSAs began as vegetable farms, with some fruit thrown in. Today there are all kinds of shares that include flowers, herbs, milk, butter, yogurt, cheese, poultry, eggs and meat - often lamb, pork and sometimes beef.

Anecdotes and recipes

One thing as crucial as sun and rain to a thriving CSA is a newsletter. It gives members weekly updates on what's in the greenhouse, the ground and the reaper.

Hauter has been writing a newsletter for the 400 members of his Virginia farm for nine years. Each week they get a dispatch on his ongoing battle with a bear over who controls the beehives, an update on an errant billy goat and some musings on farming. It has become so popular that his members are pushing him to turn it into a book.

Newsletters also provide another piece of the CSA puzzle: recipes. CSA customers, especially new ones, can find themselves with unfamiliar vegetables in quantities they'd never buy at the market. So almost all newsletters include recipes for that week's vegetables. (Hints: Rutabagas make great oven fries, and even kids like kale when it's cooked with raisins and pine nuts.)

CSA also are a way into farming for young people just starting out, because the certain income gives them a safety net. It's how Emily Oakley and Mike Appel, both 27, have made it on a 2-acre spread on leased land in Tulsa.

The couple met more than eight years ago in their first college course on agriculture, Oakley says. After apprenticing for three years on CSA farms, they moved to Oakley's hometown with $20,000 and a dream: to start one of their own.

It has been a struggle. The first year they lost peppers to torrential rain, lettuce to heat and broccoli to hungry cabbage looper larvae. But even so, they were astonished at how much they could reap.

"One week in July we harvested 1,000 pounds of tomatoes," Appel says. They had 10 members their first year, drawn by postcards sent to everyone they knew in town. "Our dentist had fliers up in his office," Oakley says.

This year they're up to 35 members who pay $15 a week each during the 20-week harvest season, which brings in about $10,500 a year. In addition, they sell about $25,000 a year at the farmers market and another $6,000 to restaurants and wholesalers, bringing their total yearly gross income to a whopping $20,750 each for the privilege of doing back-breaking labor 52 weeks a year.

But they wouldn't have it any other way. "I'm sure people look at those numbers and think 'Holy crap! That's not enough money for two people,' " Oakley says. "But it's sort of a choice you have to make."

Oakley and Appel are examples of CSA farmers who diversify, selling at farmers markets, to restaurants and to wholesalers to add income without having to work off the farm. After all, "we want to be farmers," Oakley says.

"But that CSA cash flow in the winter is critical," says farmer Judith Redmond of Full Belly Farm outside of Guinda, Calif., north of Sacramento. Full Belly makes about 25% of

its income from its CSA, about 25% from farmers markets and 50% from restaurants and wholesale sales.

Truly a family operation

A growing CSA customer base is made up of parents who want to give their children a sense that food doesn't just sprout out of the supermarket vegetable case.

At Full Belly Farm, Redmond is one of four partners who grow food for the farm's 1,000 shareholders. "We especially get a lot of people with kids who really think it's important for them to get connected to where their food comes from," she says.

Like most CSAs, Full Belly fosters its community by holding yearly potlucks in the spring, with tours, tractor rides and chances to see cows, goats, sheep and chickens.

But to the Rev. Mike Mulberry and his flock at the Community United Church of Christ in Champaign, Ill., there is a larger constituency. To them, the CSA is a kind of Christian ministry unto itself.

The parish buys three shares of the Moores' CSA and donates the food each week to a local food pantry for the hungry.

As Mulberry sees it, the Moores support the community, the parish supports the Moores, both support the social service agencies and everybody "is transformed."

IS A CSA RIGHT FOR YOU?

Pro:

Access to fresh vegetables, often organic.
Access to produce that's in season.

A connection to the farm and farmer.
An introduction to unfamiliar vegetables.

Con:

Shareholders usually must travel to a pick-up point.
Little choice in the foods.
Vegetable variety changes weekly.
An introduction to unfamiliar vegetables.

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