

CSA - an alternative marketing system

What is CSA?

CSA stands for Community Supported Agriculture, which constitutes a win-win situation for farmers and consumers and is based on a few basic principles.

At the beginning of the year, the consumer pays a fixed fee, a kind of share in the farm. Thus, he not only gets fresh products, but also gets involved in everything that's happening on the farm. He helps to carry some of the processing costs, which gives the farmer income security. Thus, the customer also shares the risk, e.g. of a poor harvest due to weather conditions.

In exchange for this, the farmer does all the work on the field and ensures that everything is done in an ecologically responsible manner. Generally, CSA farms are also bio-certified. The company also creates opportunities for the participants to meet one another via educational moments, farm parties or work-share days. The customers and the farmer thus build up their own local community.

How does CSA work?

CSA works according to the "short chain principle", meaning that there are no intermediaries between the producer and the consumer. This can work in several ways, with the following being the most popular:

Self-harvesting: The participants come right to the field and harvest their own fruit or vegetables. It can't get any fresher than that! In this way, they get to know the origin of the products better and develop an intense feeling of involvement. What's better than eating tomatoes you've picked yourself?

Packages: A second option is that the farmer does the harvesting and then prepares packages of vegetables and/or fruit for the customer, who then comes to pick up his package at a pick-up point on the farm (or elsewhere). Dairy products, eggs and meat can also be distributed in this way.



In Belgium, the first CSA - Het Open Veld [The Open Field] in Leuven - began in 2007. The Wijveld near Ghent followed in 2009, and two years later the Network CSA Flanders was set up. This Network wants to encourage exchanges between farmers and offer support to people wishing to embark on the CSA adventure.

Transitioning to or starting up a CSA farm is not something undertaken lightly, and many farmers hesitate before taking the plunge. Tom Troonbeeckx of Het Open Veld in Leuven was primarily concerned that it would produce chaos in the fields: "Looking back, everything worked out very well. Of course, from time to time you find crops that have been trodden on, but we keep that within limits by engaging in lots of communication. For example, we have a chalkboard where we post useful info, an e-mail system with regular updates and I put up green flags indicating the crops that are ready to be harvested and red ones near those that require a bit more time. It's all about making clear agreements and dealing respectfully with one another."

Where do you find CSA or self-harvest farms in Flanders?

Currently there are 40 CSA farms in Flanders. You can find them via www.csa-netwerk.be.

CSA farms primarily address themselves to individual customers, but there are also ones that collaborate with organisations or companies. The general hospital AZ Zeno was the first in Belgium to opt for delicious, healthy and honest vegetables coming from right nearby: they get their vegetables from Het Polderveld, a self-harvest farm in Westkapelle based on the principles of Community-Supported Agriculture.

Do you want to know more?

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