

“People Need to Get Connected to the Land”

We expect a positive return for our investments. What better return than well-nourished bodies and a vital environment? Small community-based investments show faith in grassroots organic farming. The return on this "seed" investment capital is a bountiful gain in soil quality and healthy, nutritious food season after season.

ROXBURY FARM COMMUNITY SUPPORTED AGRICULTURE, Claverack, NY

Small farms can be protected from closure by the investment of local communities.

Just Food, a nonprofit agency working to develop sustainable food systems in New York City, reports that in the past two decades New York state has lost nearly 20,000 farms and over a million acres of farmland. Ironically, while farmers in the region are barely able to survive, city-dwellers have little access to local produce. In addition, Just Food notes that 75 cents of every dollar spent on supermarket food goes towards advertising, processing, packaging, storing and transporting it, making the eating of it unaffordable to many. Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) is one alternative to this troubling course, so among its other goals, Just Food helps develop CSA farms in the region.

Ninety-nine percent of CSAs are organic, and Sarah Milstein, a Coordinator of CSA Programs at Just Food, debunks a tenacious myth that organic produce is difficult to sell because it does not and cannot look as attractive as produce sprayed with pesticides. “The vast majority of organic produce looks as good as or better than conventionally grown produce found in grocery stores,” Milstein said. She explained that organic produce looks much better than it did twenty years ago because organic farmers, in general, have become more experienced. Of course, organic produce that has traveled thousands of miles to reach a consumer and then sat on a grocery store shelf for a week may not look very appetizing, but Roxbury Farm CSA members don’t have to worry about that. They receive their organic, biodynamically grown produce the same day it is picked. Their produce not only looks delicious, it is some of the freshest, most nutritious food on earth.

A Share of the Harvest

Roxbury Farm Community Supported Agriculture is a 140-acre farm in Kinderhook, NY. Roxbury differs from traditional farms in that it sells its food before it is grown. Roxbury, like most CSAs, sells “shares” of an upcoming season’s harvest. One Roxbury share entitles a member to ten to fourteen pounds

of produce a week, enough for two to four people, for twenty-seven weeks of the year. To determine the price of a share, a Roxbury manager meets each winter with CSA members, represented by a "core group," to calculate all farm operating expenses, from seeds to salaries. The total operating cost is then divided by the number of shares the farm can reasonably fill. Community members purchase shares in the winter, often paying in installments. Then, as the berries ripen and the corn grows tall, the weekly harvest is divided up according to the number of shares purchased. A poor season will yield less food per share, and a good season will provide more food than expected each week.

Roxbury Farm produces about 250,000 pounds of organic food each season, and delivers its supporters twelve to fifteen different types of fruits and vegetables each week from late May through December. "Notes from the Farm" arrives with the produce at each pick-up site. Written by owner Jean Paul Courtens, the weekly newsletter offers a page of news, notes, and educational items, with a recipe on the back.

The farm's \$210,000 annual operating expenses are met almost entirely with the support of three distinct communities who purchase a total of 600 shares, making it one of the largest CSAs in the nation. Besides paying the farm, each community has its own operating expenses to consider. Budgets differ according to administrative expenses, distribution arrangements, and other factors such as newsletter production and special events. Therefore, each Roxbury Farm community determines its own price per share. Members currently pay \$350 per share, slightly more if they live in New York City to offset delivery costs. This is a good deal for shareholders. A recent Boston University study found that similar quantities and quality would cost \$700 in a supermarket and \$1,200 in a health food store.

Still, purchasing food months ahead of time is obviously risky for consumers, but Milstein reported that Roxbury communities have not had to bear any "noticeable" losses. In 1997, for example, the parsnips failed, but since the farm delivered about sixty other types of fruits, vegetables, flowers, and herbs to members that year, the lack of parsnips didn't upset the balance of anybody's diet. While no one wants to lose food or food money, with a CSA losses are less likely to be as catastrophic as they are with monocropping or conventional farming methods where a farmer enters into huge debt early in the year betting that a single crop will pay off later.

The weekly supply of fresh, organic produce is one of the most obvious benefits of CSA membership. Some CSA farms offer as many as CSA varieties of fruits, vegetables, and herbs. Many grow flowers and fruit. Still others offer honey, eggs, animal products, grains, and textiles. Another benefit is that CSAs enable

members to meet the people who grow their food, to keep in mind how and by whom food is grown.

All planting, harvesting, animal care and daily chores at Roxbury are completed by two full-time employees, three apprentices, and dozens of volunteers. All Roxbury community supporters are asked to put in two to three hours of work a season, making phone calls, bringing leftover food to emergency food services, unloading the delivery truck at a pick-up site, helping with weeding and the harvest, or doing any number of things that keep the system operating smoothly. There are eight volunteer site coordinators responsible for distribution and coordination of volunteers at each site. "The volunteers do an enormous amount of work and that helps us a lot. In fact, we have a surplus of volunteers," said Courtens. Roxbury's Columbia County community offers "harvester's shares" to members who want to work off up to 50 percent of their food costs by putting in four hours each week helping farmhands harvest labor-intensive crops. Besides gaining hands-on experience with the realities of food production, by sharing the workload, volunteers contribute a valuable service to the farmers and their communities. Added Courtens, "They love to do it because people need to make a connection to the land."

Roxbury participates in the Cooperative Rural Apprentice Farm Training (CRAFT) program to train apprentices in the methods of sustainable agriculture and to share their knowledge of CSA farming with a new generation of potential farmers. In another program involving a neighboring farm and two local supermarkets, Roxbury obtains food waste headed for landfill and reroutes it to the farm to be used as compost.

Staking a Claim

One of the greatest dangers to small farmers and organic agriculture is the competition that farmers face from land developers. Farmers shopping for land can rarely compete with real estate developers with deep pockets whose clients want to build large homes on large acreage plots. Courtens, who recently went looking for land, said, "My biggest competition was from people who wanted 100-acre estates and that drove the land value up to \$350,000. The agricultural value of the land is only \$40,000 or 50,000." Few landowners looking to turn a profit would opt to sell the land for so little when they could get so much.

Yet, throughout the United States land trusts are purchasing farmland and open spaces and creating conservation easements. In many cases, land sellers want to insure—usually for personal reasons—that their land remains a farm or open space, and a conservation easement introduces language into the deed to ensure this. In the case of Roxbury Farm, Courtens worked with Equity Trust, a

nonprofit land trust that dedicates itself to ensuring that small farmers can obtain access to land. Roxbury Farm's land is leased from Equity Trust, which owns the development rights that specify that the land must be farmed or maintained as open space, woodland, and wetland. Courtens holds an inheritable lease that he can bequeath if he so desires. "I have traded my equity," said Courtens, "for the right to access and essentially own a great piece of land to farm."

Another promising aspect to this approach is improved stewardship of the land. According to Courtens, farmers own 100,000 acres of land in Columbia County, New York. The other 60,000 acres of farmland is rented. "The farmers who have a stake in the land take much better care of it and the surrounding environment," he added.

The security provided by a CSA arrangement allows Courtens to farm in accordance with biodynamic principles. Released from market pressures, he shuns pesticides and rotates crops each season without risking financial ruin. Further, they are able to make decisions that are not economically feasible to conventional farmers, such as to allow some fields to lie fallow in order to restore nutrients. Courtens, in fact, uses only forty acres each year for raising vegetables. The rest is wetland, woodland, and creek open for public access. And though their available acreage is obviously reduced with biodynamic methods, their actual crop yield per acre has increased. While Roxbury could potentially support more than 600 members, it has set a limit—and reached it—so that the farm can maintain sustainable agricultural methods.

Currently, there are 600-700 CSAs in the United States, and their numbers are increasing. Community Supported Agriculture of North America estimates that 100,000 to 150,000 U.S. families benefit directly from food produced by CSAs. CSAs are promising, but to succeed they require a committed, cohesive group of supporters. One farmer who ultimately sold her CSA farmland lamented that not one of ten people who signed up for working shares ever showed up for work. Many of her members didn't pay their debts to the farm. In contrast, Courtens emphasized, "We have very strong core groups." For example, all of Roxbury's grants, donations, and marketing are facilitated by members. "We can do what we do on the scale we do it because many responsibilities are taken on by those outside the farm."

Source: [The Democracy Collective at the University of Maryland](#)