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## FRIENDS OF A FARMER

**Fresh organic produce on the cheap, through Community Supported Agriculture groups**

By Rebecca Migdal

*The Brooklyn Paper*

Heads up, Brooklynites: you can still join a Brooklyn Community Supported Agriculture group. You'll be supporting family farms, while saving money on your grocery bill - but time is running out for the 2006 season.

A "CSA" is an organization whose members buy cooperative shares in a small, organic farm in advance of the harvest season, which runs from June to November. These shares provide the farmer with a guaranteed income from his or her produce. In return, members get fresh-picked organic produce delivered to their neighborhood every week, at a savings.

According to Judy Janda, co-founder of the Park Slope CSA, when the group formed seven years ago, most people she approached about joining had no idea what a CSA was. Community awareness of CSAs has increased dramatically since then, she said.

"We had a table at the Fifth Avenue Street Fair, and I handed out 80 flyers. Most of the people who came by already knew about CSAs," said Janda.

Community Supported Agriculture is not a new idea, but it's one that has become increasingly popular in Brooklyn and other urban areas, where organic produce is expensive, often hard-to-find and sometimes none too fresh.

"Back in Indiana, we used to call them 'truck farms,'" jokes Carl Lawrence, a CSA member from DUMBO. Lawrence, a father of two and producer of GreenVision, a weekly TV show on environmental politics on Brooklyn Community Access Television, says his two primary reasons for being a CSA member are "to get the freshest produce at the best price, and to support family farms."

"Corporations like Con Agra and Archer Daniels Midland are swallowing up family farms, using pesticides, irradiation and genetically manipulated seed. This is a way to fight back," said Lawrence. "And you couldn't have [produce] any fresher unless you grew it yourself."

Brooklyn CSAs generally have 35 to 100 members each. Shares range from \$260-\$450 for 23 weeks of organic vegetables and herbs, often with a sliding scale depending on income. Many CSAs accept food



*Ted Blomgren in his greenhouse at Wildflower Farm, whose vegetables makes their way to Park Slope, Prospect Heights and Clinton Hill.*

stamps.

The most comprehensive resource on local CSAs is Just Food, a Manhattan-based nonprofit dedicated to fostering CSAs, community gardens and city farms. Just Food also helps CSAs provide assistance to the homeless and lower income families.

The weekly share is expected to be enough fresh vegetables for a family of four. An assortment of what's currently in season, usually around eight different kinds of vegetables, is set out in bins and members select what they like.

Fruit, egg and flower shares are also available, and some farms offer extra shares of tomatoes and other produce for canning. Organic cheeses and free range, antibiotic-free meats are also available by special order through most CSAs.

Ted Blomgren, whose 38-acre Windflower Farm in the upstate New York town of Valley Falls provides vegetables to CSAs in Park Slope, Prospect Heights and Clinton Hill, says that he grows "an extremely wide variety of crops" like greens, tomatoes, beans, root vegetables, herbs, potatoes, squashes and flowers. A flock of 450 chickens provide eggs for CSA members and fertilizer for the gardens.

Blomgren says CSA farms "sell a different product" than other organic farms, which cater to farmers' markets, health food and grocery stores.

"We sell 23 weeks of vegetables," said Blomgren. "We find out what people like ... and that's what we try to give them." By contrast, most organic farmers tend to "specialize in what's profitable," says Blomgren. Specializing can bring bigger profits, but it makes the farms more vulnerable to pests and weather problems.

Blomgren is a little worried about the cold, wet start to the season, but says that "greens and root vegetables will do well" in a year like this one. The CSA members, as shareholders, "share in the risk" of some crops falling short due to bugs or bad weather. Still, the diversity of the plantings assures that there will always be plenty of produce.

"I want to make sure there's a good share on June 15," said Blomgren. "I know if I don't make people happy this year, they won't join again next year."

The CSA contract is made directly between the farmer and CSA members.

"The farmer came into the city regularly, personally, to deliver the vegetables," said Lawrence of his experience in previous years. Many members come to feel a close kinship with the farm where their food is produced, visiting to take a tour, or attending fall harvest festivals with their families. Other CSA members just like getting a good deal.

"Some of the people treat the CSA like a store," Lawrence says. He admits that the scheduled pickup time "can be inconvenient, depending on the location." He recommends joining a CSA close to home.

"There's always someone who doesn't pick up his share" on a given week, said Lawrence, so unclaimed produce is donated to City Harvest and other soup kitchens.

Typically, all members are required to volunteer a certain number of hours each season (in Park Slope CSA, it's five), helping to sort vegetables, unload the truck or assist other members. Volunteers who want to become "core members" of their CSA can often earn free or discounted shares by working extra hours.

Volunteering at the weekly drop-off "can be a fun way to meet other members," said Park Slope CSA's Janda.

Brooklyn families, Lawrence believes, benefit from CSAs, an affordable source for fresh food that's free of pesticides.

"They're absolutely healthier," he claimed. Equally importantly, said Lawrence, "It's a way of keeping family farms alive; that's always good for the community."

*Park Slope CSA's distribution site is Garden of Union, Union Street between Fourth and Fifth avenues in Park Slope. For more information, write to 172 Fifth Ave., PMB #50, Brooklyn, NY 11217-3504, call (718) 707-1023 or visit the Web site [www.parkslopecsa.org](http://www.parkslopecsa.org). Shares: \$260-\$460. Deadline to register: ongoing throughout the season until filled.*

*Clinton Hill CSA's distribution site is PS 56 Lewis Latimer School, corner of Gates Avenue and Downing Street In Clinton Hill. For more information, write to P.O. Box 050377, Brooklyn, NY 11205, call (718) 907-0616, or visit the Web site [www.clintonhillcsa.org](http://www.clintonhillcsa.org). Shares: \$156-\$414. Deadline to register: June 15.*

*For more information and a listing of CSAs by neighborhood, contact Paula Lukats at Just Food, 208 E. 51st St. at Third Avenue in Manhattan, (212) 645-9880, ext. 233 or visit the Web site [www.justfood.org](http://www.justfood.org).*

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