

# Residents partner with local farmers to get fresh produce weekly

*Press-Telegram, Daily News, Daily Breeze*

*September 8, 2010*

*By A.K. Whitney*

***Editor's note: This is the first of a four-part series on local Community Supported Agriculture programs, which provide consumers with locally grown produce. Part one explains the programs; the remaining segments will show how the allotted produce was used in the preparation of homemade dishes.***

"I feel like a trick-or-treater," says the young man holding a large canvas bag, as a woman rummages in a large cardboard box – one of many – set on a long table in front of him.

But the treat she pulls out and puts in his bag isn't candy – it's two ears of corn.

And it's not Halloween, it's a sunny late-summer afternoon in an alley off of Main Street in Santa Monica.

The young man, as well as others in line behind him, also carrying reusable bags, are picking up their week's share of fruits and vegetables - produce they've signed up for through a Community Supported Agriculture program, or CSA.

CSA programs are not exactly new. They've been around for at least 30 years. But thanks to the growing popularity of farmers

markets and the locavore movement (that encourages buying food grown in the area, not shipped across country or from overseas), CSA programs are sprouting all over the country. Southern California is no exception.

"They were very limited," said Jonathan Reinbold, executive director of the Tierra Miguel Foundation, a San Diego County-based CSA that provides produce to pickup points in San Diego, Orange County, Long Beach, Los Angeles, the San Fernando Valley and the South Bay. "Two years ago, there were four (in Southern California). There are at least 13 that I know of now."

Homegrown-food consultant Judy Frankel used to run a CSA of sorts from her small farm in Rancho Palos Verdes.

"I'm not producing enough to do a CSA now," Frankel said, adding that she will, however, supply produce to neighbors. "It does seem like people are very interested in it. People are understanding more about food security. They realize if they buy food directly from the farms they can know what the farm's practices are."

Recent E. coli and salmonella scares have made people more aware than ever of how large-scale farming practices can hurt the consumer, Frankel said. Besides, she added, locally grown tastes fresher and has a lower carbon footprint.

But how is CSA different from supporting farmers by buying produce at local farmers markets?

Prices are comparable - depending on which CSA you join, \$25 will get you a nice selection of fruits, vegetables and herbs, enough for about five dinners for two. But CSAs provide a much closer relationship between farmer and consumer. Not only do you buy whatever the farm produces from week to week, you also share in any loss.

"CSA is a way for the growers and the eaters to share in production and preservation of farmland," Reinbold said. "When we have a crop loss as a farm, we are able to share that loss with our members. Right now, we have an abundance, but we don't have refunds. We try to make it clear a Tierra Miguel Foundation CSA is not buying vegetables, you are buying a membership to a farm."

That membership at Tierra Miguel Foundation costs \$250, which gets you 10 weeks of shares. Such conditions, not to mention the idea of occasionally getting a fruit or vegetable you don't enjoy or know how to cook - or even learning to eat seasonally, when the nearest grocery store offers strawberries in December - can be a challenge.

"It's kind of an education," said Jenny Suter, a Long Beach resident who has been running a CSA pickup point out of her home for about a year. "It's not for some people."

Suter's pickup gets most of its produce from Tanaka Farms in Irvine.

Tanaka Farms' CSA programs are at more than 70 schools, 10 businesses and two churches in Orange County, Long Beach, Lakewood, Downey, Los Alamitos, Cerritos, Torrance and several other South Bay cities.

"We started in Long Beach three years ago," said Eileen Kato, Tanaka's CSA spokeswoman. "We had Naples Elementary. From there, it took off."

Tanaka charges between \$20 and \$30 for its shares, and part of the money goes back to the school or church that hosts it, which makes it a great fundraiser, Kato said.

As with the Tierra Miguel Foundation, Tanaka's CSA members help the farm absorb losses.

"If there is a crop failure, we do not lower the price," Kato said. "We will try to put more of another fruit or vegetable in the box. We also will work with other local farms or growers to make sure we have enough produce and fruits in the boxes."

The concern that just one farm will not produce enough variety for a CSA share has led some to start programs that rely on several farms at a time.

CSA California, which supplies produce to Santa Monica, Los Angeles, Echo Park, Westchester, Culver City, North Hollywood and other areas in Los Angeles County, relies on at least four farms per week.

CSA California is run by Topanga Canyon resident Sara Paul. Paul started the CSA two years ago with a partner (he has since moved on to start other programs out of state) after realizing there was a lot of demand for locally grown produce, even among kids at her daughter's school.

"My daughter Angel would bring her lunch, and the other kids would like her lunch better than the school lunch," Paul said, adding that \$2 of CSA California's \$25 shares help support that school.

Like Tanaka and the Tierra Miguel Foundation, CSA California members accept what they're given (though at the Santa Monica location, the recent offering was a choice between carrots and cucumbers). Members also agree to pick up produce at a predetermined place, whether it's an elementary school, a park or an alley.

But other organizations are making it even easier for customers to try a CSA.

Long Beach-based beachgreens delivers shares of locally grown

fruits and vegetables - priced between \$30 and \$60 - to people's homes in greater Long Beach, Lakewood and Seal Beach.

"I started beachgreens in July 2007 in an effort to make organic and sustainably grown produce direct from local farmers more readily available for the average busy person in the Long Beach area," wrote owner Aliye Aydin on beachgreens' website.

Though customers are expected to eat seasonally, "it takes getting used to - if you're not used to shopping at farmers markets it's a bit of a hurdle," Aydin said, adding that participants can opt out of certain selections.

California Harvest Local Delivery, a company started just three weeks ago, provides the same service in Agoura Hills, Westlake, Burbank, Calabasas, Glendale and other cities in the San Fernando Valley. Shares run between \$45 and \$70.

"I got bummed with the produce choices at CSAs," said Dawn Gray, who runs the business with her sister.

Both are big fans of pick-it-yourself farms. "I love the idea of getting the produce more local," she said.

Whichever CSA you choose, a question remains: How easy is it to put the weekly shares to good use?

Over the next three weeks, we will write about the experience of being a part of Community Supported Agriculture.

Will we become converts?

Or will we resume shopping for out-of-season produce at the grocery store?

