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Chicago Edition

## **Community Supported Agriculture Takes Root in Chicagoland CSAs Connect Urban Residents to Nearby Farmers**

by Iya Bakare

Who says people can't eat healthy and connect with their community at the same time?

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) is making waves in Chicago by combining farming and community gathering, which are both reasons these farms are growing in popularity in the city, says Jim Slama, founder and president of Familyfarmed.org., located in Oak Park, Ill.



“CSA is a direct connection to the summer and customers enjoy it because they have an opportunity to own a piece of the production,” says Slama. “The produce from the growing season is an investment in a piece of the farm.”

In CSA farming, both farmers and consumers collaborate in the production of goods during the area's growing season. Consumers share the costs of the farm with the farmers, in addition to a profit of the harvest. Community members pay for the supplies to harvest the crops and receive goods during the growing season that lasts from June through November. Once the produce is harvested, most CSA organizations offer a weekly delivery service and pick-up locations where customers collect their food, explains Slama.

Within each CSA, a group is responsible for the distribution of the produce, the organization of community gatherings and both the collection and appropriation of funds. Many of the farms in CSA farming are family-owned businesses.

Chicago residents benefit from the fresh produce of the farms, while producers of the crops profit from the revenue consumers give in exchange for goods. This also provides the creation of new job opportunities for both farmers and business investors.

In addition, as the recession continues and people become more environmentally conscious, consumers continue to search for more cost-effective and healthy ways of living, says Slama. Increasingly, people also are incorporating more fruits and vegetables into their diets, which is another reason more CSA farms develop not only in Chicago, but throughout the country, he adds.

Irv & Shelly's Fresh Picks of Niles, Ill., started its CSA from the founding couple's desire to acquire local organic food. The company teamed up with farmers who needed the distribution of their products and formed a delivery service of fresh organic produce to customers in the Chicago area.

Chicagoland area farms that are interested in participating in CSA farming should be located in the Midwest where Chicago markets can access them easily, owned or operated on a family scale and certified as an organic farm.

There are over 30 CSA programs accessible to Chicagoland residents, two of which are located in the city. These programs allow consumers the ability to support and benefit from a farm closest to their communities.