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FOR SIERRA CLUB MEMBERS OF SAN BENITO, SANTA CLARA, AND SAN MATEO COUNTIES

APRIL/MAY 1996

Farm Support

By Cindy Anders

There were voracious ground squirrels, swarms of cucumber beetles, 100-degree days and chilly nights, but Our Farm, a new Community Supported Agriculture project in Woodside, survived.

"At first, I was worried about where people's motivation was in joining," says Reynie Lave, who, along with Dave Blume, founded Our Farm a year ago. "It was a real shot in the arm to realize that people supported us — that they didn't see us as just a grocery store."

And that, in short, is the essence of Community Supported Agriculture, otherwise known as CSA. Instead of purchasing food in a supermarket, far removed from the ups and downs of farm life, CSA members invest in their farm and farmer and share the risk.

CSA members buy a "share" of a farm, putting up money for a weekly ration of vegetables and herbs. When the rain falls on time, the days are bright and sunny and the bugs kept at bay, shareholders reap the bonanza — extra spinach, more tomatoes, cart loads of squash. But when the weather is capricious or any number of miniature disasters occur, shareholders pick up a lighter basket — less lettuce one week, no cucumbers all summer or fewer tomatoes than they were hoping to see.

As consumers and farmers look for alternative ways to distribute food, CSAs are sprouting up around the country. The number of CSAs nationwide has jumped to over 500 in the last five years. And each year more are added to the roster.

"The interest in CSAs is expanding faster than the farmers who are doing it," says Blume, who sees CSAs as the food version of alternative energy, a way to strengthen and invest in local communities.

Around the country, CSAs vary in size and organization. Some CSAs have fewer than a dozen members, others feed 450 families. Some leave all the bookkeeping and organizing to the farmers, others delegate those tasks to committees. Some require



Photo: Cindy Anders

Dave Blume and Reynie Lave checking seedlings in the green house at Our Farm, a CSA in Woodside.

shareholders to pick up and weigh their own produce on the farm, others deliver it to your door.

Blume's CSA, which has delivery points in San Francisco, Berkeley and at the farm itself, had 80 members last year, but hopes to nearly double in size this year. Besides Our Farm, there are three other CSAs that serve parts of San Mateo, Santa Clara and San Benito counties. (See list pg. 9)

The "shares" are as varied as the CSAs

that produce them. Most farms provide a variety of vegetables and fruits that change with the seasons.

At Our Farm a share costs \$24 a week, \$925 for a full three-season share, which runs from April 1 to the end of December. For that, shareholders get about a bushel of whichever of the farm's more than 40 vegetables and herbs are available that week. The produce ranges from salad greens, tomatoes and

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Like Mom always said,

Eat your vegetables!

They say, "You are what you eat." How fitting, then, that this year's Earth Day will focus on food and the environment.

A coalition of more than 30 Bay Area groups is organizing Earth Day events around the theme, "Food and the Environment: The Planet on Your Plate." Activities will educate people about the importance of sustainable agriculture and the benefits of eating lower on the food chain.

During Earth Week (April 15-22), 100 restaurants will serve Earth Day Specials, vegetarian meals that might include locally-

*Earth Day info courtesy of Bay Area Action

grown, organic produce. On Earth Day Weekend (April 20 & 21), community gardens will get "down-and-dirty," involving 1,000 volunteers in their spring plantings. Other activities will include healthy school lunches, decadent dinner parties with guest farmers and chefs, environmental fairs and garden celebrations. Earth Day '96 has created a strong coalition that will continue to flourish and educate the community long after April 22.

Some interesting facts:

The United States loses 3 billion tons

(More E-day activities on page 3)

Putting the 'community' into ag

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garlic to kohlrabi, tomatillos and loofa sponges. Some CSAs also provide U-pick crops, such as strawberries and green beans. For shareholders unaccustomed to dealing with so much fresh produce, the biggest challenge can be finding ways to cook up all those vegetables. That's where CSA newsletters, many of which provide recipes, come in handy.

Communication and community, in fact, are two fringe benefits CSAs take pride in. CSAs involve their members in deciding everything from what crops to grow to how to spend farm funds. Many CSAs offer members a chance to work on the farm, either as volunteers or for reduced-price shares. They organize picnics and parties and farm days, putting the "community" into community supported agriculture. At Our Farm, Blume and Lave have set up an intern program, coordinated volunteers and brought in teens from the Foundry School.

While the Woodside CSA isn't certified

as organic, Blume, Lave and Margaret Koster, another one of the farmers, pride themselves on running an ecological operation. In other words — careful attention to the soil and no pesticides.

"True organic isn't just substituting synthetic chemicals for organically approved ones," says Blume. "If you're a real organic farmer what you're farming is soil."

Walking around the carefully terraced fields of Our Farm, Koster shows some of the work the farmers have done to turn this former horse pasture into a patchwork of red-leaf lettuce, onions, kale and broccoli. They've dug "swales," ditches to hold water, piled brush for toad habitat and built trellises for scarlet runner beans to shade lettuce.

Our Farm has a few different pieces of land in the area, most of it loaned or rented in exchange for vegetables. And they're always looking for more.

"Food should be grown here," says Blume. "We hope that some of the people we train can go out and start their own CSAs here.

We're hoping to sprout lots of competition."

Whitney Ranch, La Honda

Contact: Larry Whitney (415) 747-9557

Area served: San Mateo County coast and peninsula

Our Farm, Woodside

Contact: Dave Blume (415) 365-2993

Area served: San Mateo County, N. Santa Clara, W. Alameda

Full Belly Farm

Contact: Dru Rivers (916) 796-3464

Guinda

Area served: Contra Costa, E. Bay and peninsula

Terra Firma

Winters

Contact: Carol Ellis (916) 795-3569

Area served: San Francisco, East Bay

*List courtesy of CSA West

For updates or more information on CSAs contact: Jered Lawson, Community Alliance with Family Farmers, CSA West

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