

Community Supported Agriculture and the Return of the Small Farm

Greg Ramsey, May 19, 2008

With the rise of corporate farming and the decline of small farming operations, Americans are increasingly disconnected from their food. Some are attempting to counteract this disconnect through local small farming operations known as Community Supported Agriculture.

In many parts of the country, the amount of small farms near towns and communities has dwindled. Small farms were once an essential part of American culture, as recently as the early 1970s. Close-by farms supplied produce and mainstay agricultural items for the city, keeping the larger population in touch with the land and the cycles of growing food. But as these farms disappear, we are losing perhaps one of the most important links in our cities and towns - the link to the source of our food.

As oil prices burgeon out of control, we are rediscovering the advantages of close-by small farms and their reintroduction into urban and suburban areas. The greatest challenges for the reintroduction of small farms are escalating land prices due to over-development of farmland, and competition with large industrial agriculture. One of the most promising trends on this front is the CSA, or Community Supported Agriculture.

The Farm and the Village

There are two basic types of CSAs with regard to food distribution. The first is a Regional CSA Farmer who grows food and then distributes the crops throughout the local area, often at several drop-off points. The second is a Village CSA in which the farmer is located on land belonging to a village/neighborhood, and the village residents are the primary consumers of the farm's crops. For the purpose of this article, I will be describing the Village CSA.

Farmers at the East Lake Commons development, located in Decatur, Georgia. The site covers 21 acres, 11 of which are open space -- open space that is mostly devoted to farming.

To better understand the intent of the Village CSA, it helps to visualize a traditional village. Imagine a pedestrian cluster of work-spaces, shops and homes surrounded right up to its edges by cultivation and woodlands. In these traditional villages, the surrounding small farms supplied fresh farm produce and value-added farm goods directly to the village market - vegetables, fruits, flowers, herbs, nuts and seeds in season, and local dairy products and



fresh meats. Along with these direct farm-grown products were also "farm value-added products", or secondary products, developed from the first level of farm goods. These included canned and dry goods, wine, cheese, herbal tinctures, and a variety of prepared foods and medicinals. Each local area produced its own variety of primary and secondary agricultural products based on climate and culture. Through this exchange between farmers and villagers, villages and micro-regions developed "signature products" and much of their cultural identity, celebrating the seasonal arrival of key crops and prepared food items. Reviving this relationship between local farmer and community is at the core of the modern Village CSA, where commonly-owned land is set aside as farmland and operated as a small-scale farm.

Local Farming Comes Back to America

The American Village CSA movement is gaining momentum due to the competitive advantage and social and cultural diversity it offers the farmer. Instead of competing with high land prices and industrial agriculture on the open market, a Village CSA farmer develops a direct relationship with the residents of a new village or existing neighborhood. The village or neighborhood owns the farm and its assets as a home owners association or neighborhood association and allows the farmer to manage the farm enterprise with few restrictions, other than offering the village residents first dibs on farm-grown goods before selling to the larger neighborhood. Typically the farmer starts with a produce farm that is expanded to include vineyards and orchards. In this exchange the new village or existing neighborhood offers the farmer the following advantages:

- No land expense: after a short trial period, the farmer takes out a long term lease from the village or neighborhood home owners association (HOA) for \$1 per month.
- Predetermined Adjacent Market: the village or neighborhood residents provide the primary market literally a stones-throw from the farm, avoiding costly and environmentally impactful transportation and refrigeration.
- Capitalization of the farm: The HOA provides capital in the first year or two to invest in the initial preparation of the farm, including a limited salary for the farmer for that period of time, soil preparation, and basic farm equipment and storage buildings (tractor, barn, etc.). In addition, the HOA provides a base for yearly maintenance and reparation fees for the farm.
- Affordable Dwelling: The HOA provides a permanent affordable dwelling for the farmer and interns.

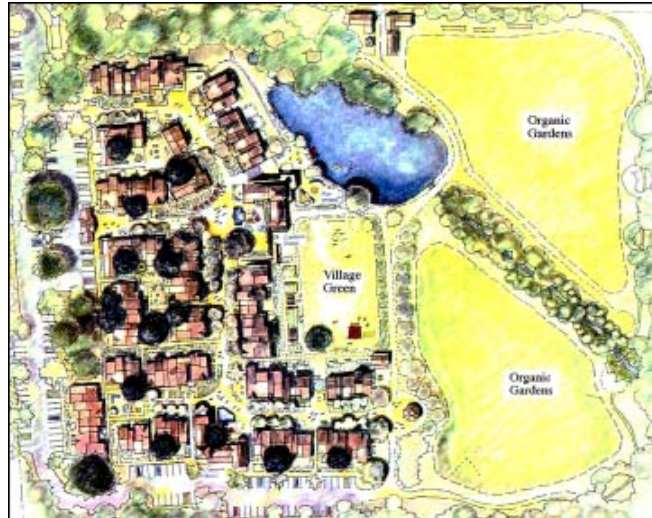
Through this village/neighborhood-farm relationship, the village's or neighborhood's advantages far outweigh the investment in the "farm amenity". One of the primary advantages is the fresh farm produce and goods, which are devoid of processing, long distance transportation, refrigeration and food preservatives. Other benefits include walks to the farm, festivals and market days, overlooking a dynamic scenic farm landscape, and rich educational opportunities for the young, adult and elderly. The farm also creates other economic development opportunities for secondary products, such as cheese and prepared foods.

Examples of Community Supported Agriculture

My design firm is currently working on three examples of CSAs in the metropolitan Atlanta region, including a new village and CSA farm (East Lake Commons), a farm preservation undertaking in Carroll County (Brokenfoot Farm), and the introduction of CSA farms into in-town neighborhoods.

A site plan for the East Lake Commons development, Decatur, Georgia. The project was completed in 2000 and consists of 67 homes.

East Lake Commons was the first of what we call Conservation Communities located in Atlanta. A cluster of 67 units were sited on 8 acres, preserving approximately 12 acres of land for agriculture and woodland. A CSA farm was developed on the property (GAIA Gardens), which is managed by the gardener and farmer Daniel Parson. GAIA Gardens supplies the majority



of the development's residents with fresh produce and the surplus is sold outside the neighborhood. In addition, GAIA Gardens has created educational opportunities by setting up internships and Summer Youth Camps on the farm.

Brokenfoot Farm is a current conservation community designed to preserve an active farm in Carroll County. In this case, a small farm hamlet of 15 homes is being planned on the farm property, preserving over 90% of the land and providing revenues to preserve the active farm.

We are also actively working with in-town neighborhoods to introduce the concept of neighborhood CSA farms.

The future for village and neighborhood Community Supported Agriculture is enormous. Imagine being able to walk from most parts of a city to small local farms that are integrated into preserved green spaces and green belts and that supply fresh produce and farm goods into the farmers markets at the hearts of our neighborhoods. Through Community Supported Agriculture, we truly can have the best of both worlds: the city and the farm together.

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