



Harmony Valley Farm

An update for our Community Supported Agriculture Members - Since 1993

www.harmonyvalleyfarm.com

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Making A Connection...

By Farmer Richard

It is now official, reported in major and minor news outlets across the country... CSA farmers are losing members faster than they are being replaced with new members. We started to see a decline in our CSA membership around 2009, and unfortunately we aren't the only farm that has seen numbers slowly slide each year. Many thought it was the economic downturn, but overall sales of organic foods is still consistently continuing to grow each year. More and more people are concerned about the health of their family and turning to organic. So why the decline in CSA membership?

We, and other CSA farmers, have been asking this question and trying to figure out what's going on for the past few years. One reason may be supersaturation of CSA farms offering shares. During the past 6 to 8 years the number of new CSA farms has grown faster than the rate of new members interested in joining a CSA. Most of the growth in CSA farms has been beginning farmers with little experience. We have long understood that CSA farming is "graduate level" farming, not for beginners. Growing a wide variety of crops to fill boxes over a full season requires skill and experience. Many consumers have been alienated forever by a poor CSA experience, "All we got was kale!" Certainly not true, but a perception from "new" CSA customers who were also new to eating "in season."

Organic food has also become more available at almost all supermarkets, mostly shipped in from distant growers. The advantage for customers is they can stop in and buy a few items of their choosing for dinner without the commitment of the whole box of CSA vegetables. It is good that more acres somewhere in the world are being farmed organic, without toxic chemistry, but what about eating locally and eating in season?

Another contributing factor to the decline in CSA may be attributed to the growth we've seen in farmers' markets. The USDA estimates farmers' markets have doubled over the past 10 years. While it may be convenient for customers to shop at their small neighborhood markets, this growth has not been as good for farmers. In addition to pulling members away from choosing a CSA share, farmers are also seeing their sales at each market become diluted. Many farmers now have to go to several markets per week to sell the same amount of produce that they used to sell at a larger, once-a-week market!

Finally, as times have changed we've

This Week's Box

ITALIAN GARLIC: If you miss having fresh garlic after the summer harvests wrap up, you can freeze garlic to preserve it for later use. Just peel the clove and seal in a freezer bag for storage in the freezer.

SWEET ONIONS: For an indulgent appetizer, slice your sweet onions into large wedges and separate the layers. Dip the onion chunks in your favorite beer batter and deep fry until golden and crisp.

ZUCCHINI OR FLYING SAUCER SUMMER SQUASH: Stuffed summer squash can be a simple way to cover all your food groups in one dish. Add a mixture of chicken, quinoa, feta cheese, parsley and green onion and you'll have a tasty and satisfying meal.

CUCUMBERS: Cool off with a great summer drink of blended cucumbers, pineapple, mint or basil and ice.

NEW POTATOES: Fresh potatoes hold up well in roasting. Try going Greek by drizzling with olive oil and tossing with oregano, lemon juice, salt and pepper. Roast until browned and tender.

SWEET CORN: See last week's vegetable feature for more details on sweet corn preparation and preservation. Remember to keep it cold to preserve its sweetness.

RED OR YELLOW GRAPE OR SUN ORANGE TOMATOES: When reaching for cheese and crackers, top with snack size tomatoes for a bit of sunshine in your snacking.

MIXED VARIETY TOMATOES: If you like having homemade sauce available year-round but don't have the patience or time to do traditional tomato sauce canning, check out the reformationacres.com blog for a much simpler marinara-inspired recipe that lends itself to freezing.

GREEN BELL PEPPERS: The bell is the square, blocky, sweet pepper in this week's share. Stuffed peppers are a favorite in my husband's family. Pick your favorite ground meat or combine a couple together. You could even go vegetarian and opt for beans and grains like brown rice or couscous.

ITALIAN FRYING PEPPERS: These long, pointed peppers are not spicy; they are sweet peppers! Create a quick pasta sauce sautéing with tomatoes, onions and garlic.

JALAPEÑO PEPPERS: These small, firm and dark green peppers are hot! Use them to add heat by finely dicing the flesh; or take it up a notch and include the seeds as well. Remember to thoroughly wash your hands and refrain from touching your eyes or you'll be feeling the heat there as well.

EGGPLANT: See this week's vegetable feature for eggplant ideas and tips!

SWEET SARAH OR FIRST KISS OR SUN JEWEL MELON: Sweet Sarah and First Kiss are cantaloupe varieties characterized by sweet, orange flesh and a netted rind without ridges. Sun Jewels have a crisp, white flesh and a bright yellow and white rind.

FRENCH ORANGE MELON: French Orange are small melons with a netted rind that has ridges. This melon is a cross between a cantaloupe and a French Charentais. The flesh is smooth, sweet and aromatic.

RAINBOW CHARD: Sauté the chard stems. When soft, add the leaves just until they brighten in color and begin to wilt. Serve as a bed for rosemary chicken and potatoes.

seen an influx of home delivery services that will deliver not just vegetables, but everything to your door and only what you order! If you want to break it down even further, there are now meal delivery services that will deliver everything you need for a meal or two in one package. It may not be "organic" and you have to ignore all the excess packaging for the service, but if you only cook a couple meals a week it may seem like a good option.

As you can see, there are now lots of options for where and how you can purchase food! Unfortunately some families have less time to plan and cook meals, thus they opt for choices with the highest level of convenience. So where does CSA fit into the current picture? Well, despite the decrease we've seen in our own membership over the past seven years,

we still consider CSA to be beneficial to our business and the part of our business we enjoy the most. We're not ready to "give-up" on our CSA and don't believe CSA is going out of style. Despite the changes we've seen in the food supply over the past 7-10 years, the concept of CSA remains the same. CSA still stands for "Community Supported Agriculture" and offers one of the most holistic approaches to sourcing food for your family. Yes, you are supporting our farm by purchasing shares with us for the season, but it's so much more than that. We are part of the same community and we support each other. As CSA members, you have direct access to your farm and the land where your food is grown. We talk to you each week through our newsletters and email communications and you can talk to us any time you'd like.

You are welcome to come to the valley where your food is grown...breathe the air, walk in the soil and experience not only the food we're producing, but the land and area in which it is grown. Last week Bobbie reminded us all just how special and unique our region is and we want to share this experience with you as well.

When you participate in a CSA, you have an opportunity to connect with the people and places where your food comes from. You learn what it means to eat with the rhythms of nature and embrace the seasonality of eating. When melons are in their peak (as they are this week), you eat melon several times a day! In the spring you long for anything green and in the fall we can't wait to eat rich winter squash and sweet potatoes.

We have seen and heard so many positive stories from members about how CSA has changed and made a positive impact on their lives. We have many members who joined our CSA when their children were little, twenty years ago. These kids had the opportunity to grow up as "CSA kids." They are now healthy adults seeking out their own CSAs and continue to ask "where does my food come from?" For many of these kids, their first taste of vegetables was something from our farm. Many of them visited our farm when they were youngsters. They camped in the meadow and played in the creek, fed the animals, got to sit on the tractors, gorged on warm strawberries in the field, picked peas right off the plant and built lasting memories of their farm. They know what "real" food tastes like, understand how to eat with the seasons, and know how to cook and prepare whole foods! We've heard many stories about picky eaters who, after a visit to the farm, will now eat vegetables...but only vegetables from "their farm!" Other members have told us they eat more vegetables and have seen positive health benefits as a result of eating out of a CSA box. Yes, eating out of a CSA box requires time and cooking, but it also gives you an opportunity to learn new things about food, build culinary skills and gives you an opportunity to spend invaluable time cooking and eating with your family.

We value the connection we have with you through our partnership in CSA. There are so many benefits beyond the actual box that come along with the CSA experience. This is something special and unique that a supermarket or home delivery service will never be able to match

Vegetable Feature: Eggplant

Eggplant is one of the most beautiful crops we grow. The plants grow several feet tall and, in their peak, are loaded with beautiful glossy fruit hanging heavy on the plant. There are many varieties of eggplant ranging in size from small round eggplant the size of a golf ball to large globe eggplant weighing over a pound. They come in a variety of colors ranging from various shades of purple to black, green, lavender, white and orange. We have narrowed our lineup of eggplant to our four favorite varieties including Lilac Bride, Purple Dancer, Listada and the traditional Black eggplant.

Eggplant is a member of the nightshade family. While it is thought to have originated in the area around India and Pakistan, it has now been spread around the world. Since eggplant is part of so many cultures, you can take your pick on how you'd like to enjoy it. It is often incorporated into curry and stir-fry dishes in Indian, Thai and Chinese cuisine. Sicilians are famous for eggplant caponata while Middle Eastern dishes include baba ganoush. The French put their mark on eggplant with the traditional Provençal dish, ratatouille. Eggplant has a mild flavor and soft texture when cooked. Many resources will tell you to salt eggplant before cooking it to remove bitterness. While older varieties were bitter, the new varieties we grow have been bred so they are not bitter, thus you can skip the salting step. Most of our varieties of eggplant have skin that is tender enough to eat, thus you do not need to peel them.

Eggplant does not store terribly well, so it is best to use it soon after getting it. It is best stored at a temperature of about 45-50°F, but your home refrigerator should be colder than this. Thus, we recommend storing your eggplant on the kitchen counter until you are ready to use it. Use within 2-4 days of when you receive it.

Use the guide below to identify the eggplant in your box this week. We also have pictures on our blog to help you figure out which variety you have.

Eggplant Varieties

Black Globe Eggplant: This is the most familiar variety of eggplant. It is characterized by a dark skin that looks black. It is best used in dishes like Eggplant Parmesan or to make dips, etc. This variety will also hold up on the grill or if roasted.

Lilac Bride Eggplant: Lilac bride eggplant is long and slender with lavender skin and white flesh. It is best used in Thai curry dishes, stews or any other preparation where you want the eggplant to hold its shape better.

Listada Eggplant: Listada is characterized by a small globe shape with dark purple/magenta skin streaked with white stripes. It is an Italian heirloom variety characterized by dense "meaty" flesh that holds up very well with grilling or roasting.

Purple Dancer Eggplant: This superb variety is characterized by an elongated tear drop shape and a bright purple skin. Purple Dancer eggplant is an all-purpose eggplant that has creamy, white flesh. It is firm enough that it keeps its shape if you grill it or use it in curries, soups or stews. The flesh is also soft enough when cooked to use in dips, etc.

Baked Eggplant Parmesan Penne

Yield: 6 servings

1 Tbsp vegetable oil	One large eggplant (approximately 1 ¼ pound), cut into ½-inch dice
1 pound ground pork (optional)	¼ tsp crushed red pepper
2 Tbsp extra-virgin olive oil	3 cups marinara sauce
1 large sweet onion, finely chopped	12 ounces penne pasta
1 sweet Italian frying pepper, diced	½ cup lightly packed fresh basil, torn
1 cup fresh mushrooms, sliced	4 ounces fresh mozzarella, diced
4 garlic cloves, minced	¼ cup freshly grated Parmesan cheese
Salt, to taste	½ cup panko bread crumbs
Freshly ground black pepper, to taste	

1. In a large saucepan, heat the vegetable oil until shimmering. Add the pork, if using, and cook over medium heat until browned. If you are not using pork, skip directly to step 2.
2. Add the 2 Tbsp extra-virgin olive oil to the pan. Add the onion, pepper, mushrooms and garlic along with a generous pinch of salt and pepper and sauté over moderate heat, stirring, until the vegetables are softened. Add the eggplant and ¼ cup of water and cover. Cook, stirring periodically, for 8-10 minutes or until the eggplant is tender. Remove the lid and add crushed red pepper and marinara sauce. Continue to cook, gently, until the sauce is hot, about 4 minutes.
3. Preheat the broiler and position the rack 8 inches from the heat. Bring a large pot of salt water to a boil. Add the penne to the boiling water and cook until al dente. Drain the pasta, reserving ½ cup of the cooking water. Stir the pasta, cooking water and the basil into the sauce and season with salt and pepper.
4. Transfer the pasta to a 9 x 13-inch baking dish. Scatter the mozzarella on top followed by the Parmesan and panko. Broil the pasta for about 4 minutes, until the cheese is melted and the panko is lightly browned. Serve hot.

Recipe adapted from *Food and Wine Magazine*, December 2013.