



CSA Retention Report

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www.practicalfarmers.org/programs/Horticulture.php

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Introduction

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) is an excellent model for some Iowa fruit and vegetable farms. Marketing is done pre-season, cash is available for seed and supply purchases at the right time, and most importantly, relationships are formed between farmers and eaters. This relationship creates an arena that increases awareness of how food is produced, how hard farmers work and how to eat both seasonally and healthfully.

While this sounds idyllic, CSA farms have experienced lower retention rates in the past few years. CSAs regularly survey members to research levels of satisfaction and ways to improve, but these farmers feel their customers are often too polite. These farmers asked Practical Farmers of Iowa to conduct a third-party survey of non-renewing members to investigate why they haven't returned.

The Farms

Three CSA farms in Iowa participated: one in northeast, one in east-central and one in central Iowa. These farms, on paper, look similar in price and offerings. Two are certified organic while the third practices chemical-free production. Each farm sells 120 to 180 shares each season. They have been operating CSAs from nine to 16 years.

After the 2012 season commenced, participating farms provided a list of lapsed members from the past three seasons. Practical Farmers surveyed these members using Survey Monkey, and received 124 responses: 47 from farm "a," 38 from farm "b," and 30 from farm "c."

The Respondents

Sixty-two percent of respondents reported that their interest in local foods had increased over the last three years; 36 percent reported that interest in local foods had remained the same, and 2 percent reported a decrease in interest.

Meeting Local Food Desires: When asked how they satisfy their local food needs:

- ▶ 75 percent said through farmers markets
- ▶ 59 percent said at grocery stores
- ▶ 50 percent said by growing their own produce in a home garden; and
- ▶ 18 percent said they had joined another CSA.

Respondents also reported using online ordering services such as the Iowa Food Coop, the Iowa Valley Food Coop and Wallace Farms.

Reasons for Joining a CSA: Respondents were asked to rate the importance of a series of potential motivations in their decision to become a member of their most recent CSA on a five-point scale from “not important at all” (1) to “extremely important” (5).

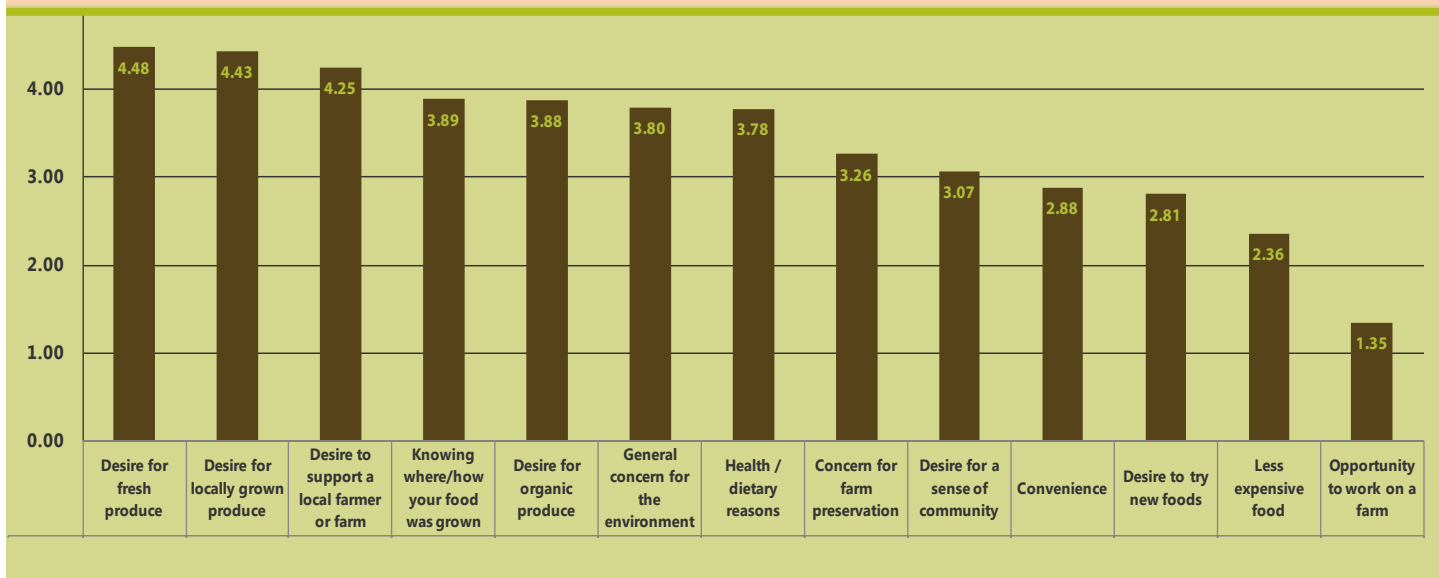
The desire for fresh produce, locally grown produce and to support a local farmer were the top three reasons people signed up for CSAs. (See list of full reasons in **Chart 1** below).

Non-renewing members were asked a number of questions about the last CSA they had been part of. Respondents:

- ▶ had been members of their previous CSAs for one to 16 years (an average of 3.25 years).
- ▶ lived from one to 60 miles from the farm, with an average distance lived from the farm of 19 miles.
- ▶ traveled from one to 30 miles each week to pick up their share, with an average pick-up travel distance of seven miles.

Sixty-three percent of respondents reported that they never visited the farm during the last season they were a member; 32 percent visited once or twice; and just 5 percent had been to their CSA farm more than twice.

Chart 1 - Factors affecting respondents' decision to participate in a CSA.



Satisfaction

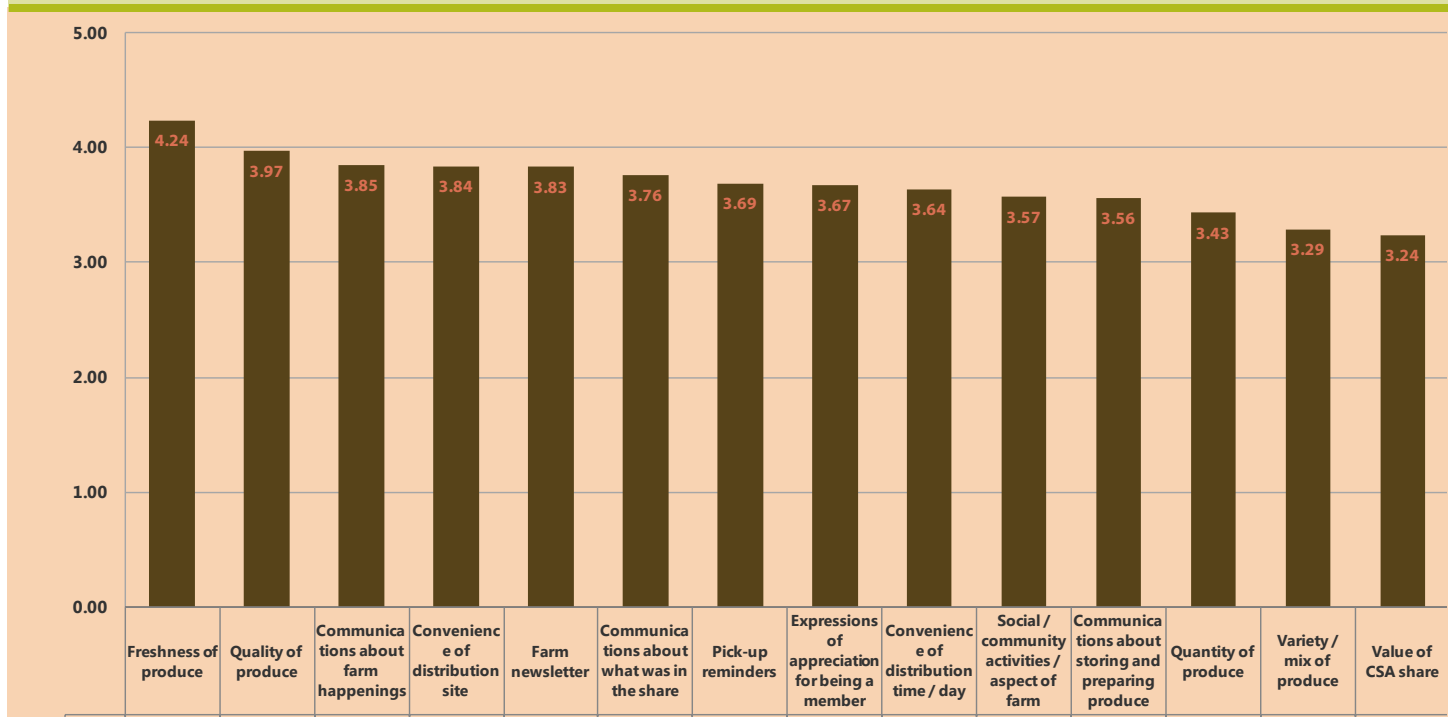
Non-renewing members were asked to rate their satisfaction with a number of dimensions of CSA membership on a five-point scale from “very unsatisfied” (1) to “extremely satisfied” (5). Satisfaction rated fairly high for all categories. As illustrated in **Chart 2** (below), survey respondents were most satisfied with the quality and freshness of produce offered through the CSA, and least satisfied with the value, variety and quantity.

When asked about favorite aspects of being part of the CSA, most prevalent were comments about getting fresh, local food. Supporting a local farmer and being introduced to new items were also cited often. There were many compliments to the farmers and their efforts.

Some Respondents' Favorite Aspects of Being in a CSA

- ▶ *“Sense of community and making a difference.”*
- ▶ *“Produce received was of better quality and freshness than that of the stores. Loved it was local!”*
- ▶ *“It was fun to get a new box every week. It was always interesting produce, beautiful, fresh and delicious. I loved the newsletter, recipes, learning how to eat with the seasons.”*
- ▶ *“Quality of the produce and knowing more fully what goes into the production.”*
- ▶ *“Interaction with the growers and volunteers at the pick-up site; they truly are great people.”*
- ▶ *“The freshness and flavor of the produce. Nothing can compare to “home” or local grown.”*
- ▶ *“Knowing where my food was grown, by whom and how.”*
- ▶ *“Meeting like minded people, Getting to try veggies I would otherwise not have tried.”*
- ▶ *“Knowing the people who grow my food and excellent quality of product.”*

Chart 2 - Satisfaction with CSA farm, thinking about the season on average.
(1 = Very Unsatisfied; 5 = Extremely Satisfied).



Reasons for Leaving

Non-renewing members were asked to rate the role that a number of potential reasons played in their decision not to renew on a five-point importance scale ranging from “not important at all” (1) to “extremely important” (5). **Chart 3** (below) shows the top reasons people did not rejoin. Having to throw away produce they could not use, not enough variety in the share the CSA not meeting expectations were the top three cited reasons that people chose to not renew their membership.

When asked to comment on their two least favorite aspects of the CSA, the number one answer was that shares lacked a satisfactory variety of items the respondents liked versus didn't like. The second most common response was that the share was inconvenient to pick up. Other reasons cited multiple times included poor value for money invested, waste, poor quality, lack of preparation knowledge or time, guilt over not using

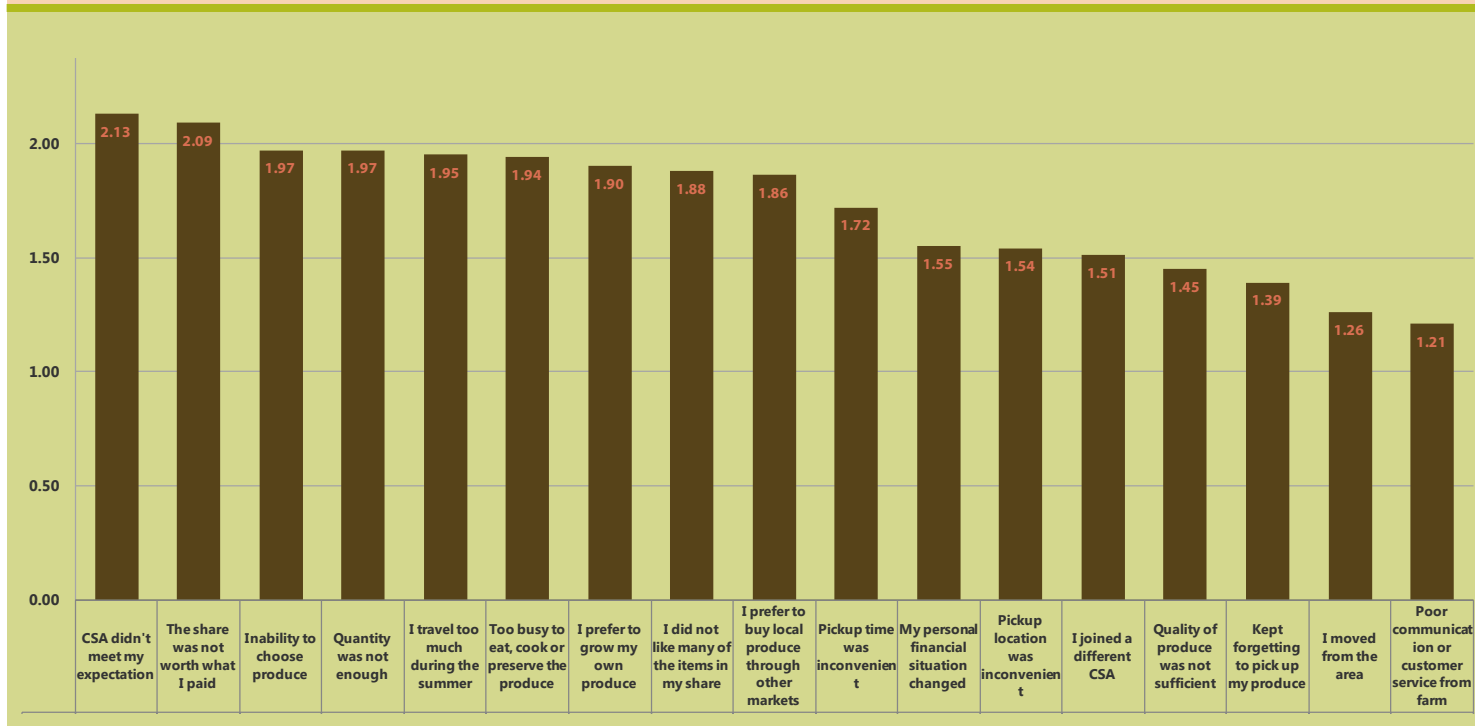
produce, dirty produce and dissatisfaction with professionalism of farmers.

Some respondents realized CSA was not the right model for them: *“It's just not for us. We're lazy.”* Another commented: *“I don't think the model fits my family. We eat a lot more veggies than average. One box didn't meet our needs and we can't afford two.”*

Almost half of survey respondents have their own garden, and some have scaled their own growing up enough that gardening is filling their demand for produce. One respondent replied: *“I have expanded my garden this year and it is more fun, a lot cheaper, I get what I want, and I have more flexibility on when I harvest so I waste less.”*

Another said: *“If I couldn't do my own garden any longer I would gladly return to being a CSA member.”*

Chart 3 - Importance of various factors in respondents' decision not to renew their CSA memberships.
(1 = Not Important at All; 5 = Extremely Important).



Some Respondents' LEAST Favorite Aspects of CSA Membership

Variety

■ "The volume of items we liked was very low and the items we didn't like was high. It was expensive enough that we made ourselves eat what we didn't like, knowing that if we had saved the money we could have picked out what we wanted at the grocery store."

■ "Not enough of the foods we actually eat (lettuce, tomato, onion, garlic). Too much of the things we don't eat. I don't need 15 cucumbers each week for a family of two. Cost given what we actually ate from the share was not really in our favor."

■ "There was entirely too much of the product that I liked least, i.e. kale – a never-ending cascade of different types of kale, kale, kale and more kale, and not enough of what I expected to get – asparagus, tomatoes, corn, kohlrabi...."

■ "Getting a lot of produce that was fun to try, but not really enjoyed by my family later on (beets, turnips, radishes).
"There wasn't enough variety...lots and lots of garlic scapes and kale. We never got some really common veggies--green beans and peas."

Inconvenience

■ "It was difficult to pick up some weeks due to time constraints."

"The pick-up time of a Friday afternoon was very restrictive."

■ "The Monday delivery of a full share did not fit our work and family schedule."

Value

■ "When there was a shortage we shared the shortfall but when there was a bounty we could purchase extra. A share should be a share, better or worse."

■ "Became too expensive for what I received."

■ "It seemed expensive for the amount of produce, especially the last two years."

■ "I had to spend the same amount of time and money at the grocery store because so much of the share was not really stuff that I 'needed' but could use for 'fill' (cabbage, onions, squash); still had to buy tomatoes, sweet corn, new potatoes, green beans, cucumbers... because there usually either wasn't any or enough for more than one meal."

Flexibility

■ "No control over what I got."

■ "Not being able to select which items I'd receive."

Quality

■ "Getting a puny share, seeing boxes from other CSAs with a different quality vegetable in it."

Preparation

■ "It takes a lot of time to plan what you are going to do with the food. I didn't have easy recipes, didn't know how to freeze the items, etc."

Farmer Professionalism

■ "It seemed in every email they whined about how hard they worked and how difficult it was to get everything done. Guess what? We all work hard."

■ "Produce arrived for pickup 15 to 30 minutes after they said it would, week after week."

What might bring them back as a CSA member?

▶ "Home delivery, flexible purchasing, ability to choose what is in share."

▶ "Cleaner produce."

▶ "Options to pick and choose."

▶ "Smaller share."

▶ "If I could purchase only when I am in town."

▶ "More recipes, storage and preparation tips."

▶ "Better financial situation"

▶ "Being able to purchase a la carte."

▶ "Courteous, more professional, on time."

▶ "Pick up nearby and items that did not require processing (berries, carrots, more common items)."

▶ "Home delivery would be amazing!"

▶ "If we could take weeks off of membership when we travel."

▶ "A share with quantity equal to price and variety."

▶ "More foods we already eat."

Evolution of the CSA

Community supported agriculture farms are on the rise in Iowa, creating more choices for consumers who want to purchase local food through this model. Consecutively, local produce is increasing in availability at farmers markets, grocery stores, farm stands, and through home delivery and on-line ordering sites.

This does not signify that supply is exceeding demand. It does, however, demonstrate a budding local food system. As this food system evolves, so do consumer choices. They may have had one choice for local food purchasing ten years ago, and now have a portfolio of options. Consumer expectations are changing alongside their choices. They are cognizant of the quality, value and convenience their CSAs offer, more so than they were perhaps in the mid-1990s at the beginning of the CSA movement in Iowa.

To adapt to this changing local food marketplace, CSAs are now starting to provide alternatives. Non-renewing members were asked to rate their potential interest in several of these alternative options on a scale from “not interested at all” (1) to “very interested” (5). **Chart 4** (pg. 7) shows the overall interest in alternative CSA models

Every-Other-Week and Partial Season Options

Some Iowa CSAs are already offering these alternatives. Jan Libbey and Tim Landgraf of One Step at a Time Garden, near Kanawha, offer an every-other-week share. These CSA members receive a full-size share in alternating weeks during the main season, for a total of nine distributions. The every-other-week option accommodates both small families and travelers. Jan and Tim split the summer season into partial seasons: an “early Green and Sweet” segment that covers the first part of the summer season, and a “Savor-the-Summer” segment that covers the remaining 11 weeks of their main



Jan Libbey (right) and her husband, Tim Landgraf, offer alternative CSA share options, like alternating week and partial season subscriptions, as well as numerous add-ons so customers can tailor a CSA subscription that works for them.

season. These options allow members to sign up for the part of the season they are in town, or when their favorite produce is available.

CSA Share Add-ons

Jan and Tim also have a plethora of add-on options to allow for more customization. CSA members have the option to add a fruit, herb, gourmet, fall greens, Thanksgiving or Christmas share. They can also buy kits – such as pesto, salsa, canning and roasting – to get large quantities of items for these purposes. Tim: *“We have the ability to grow many different products. Some go over well, some don’t. By creating a pesto kit, we are able to sell basil and garlic to those who want larger quantities of these items.”*

Flexible CSAs

Larry Cleverley, of Cleverley Farm near Mingo, offered a flexible CSA for the first time in 2012. *“Through the year I heard that one of the reasons people don’t join CSAs is that they’re hesitant to make a commitment for the entire season. People who did join CSAs often got things they didn’t like,*

Evolution of the CSA (cont'd)

too much of something, too many things in a row, so on and so forth."

"Another thing that entered into my internal conversation was: Court Avenue Farmers' Market (Des Moines) is getting too crowded: Not everyone likes to get up early to get good pickings."

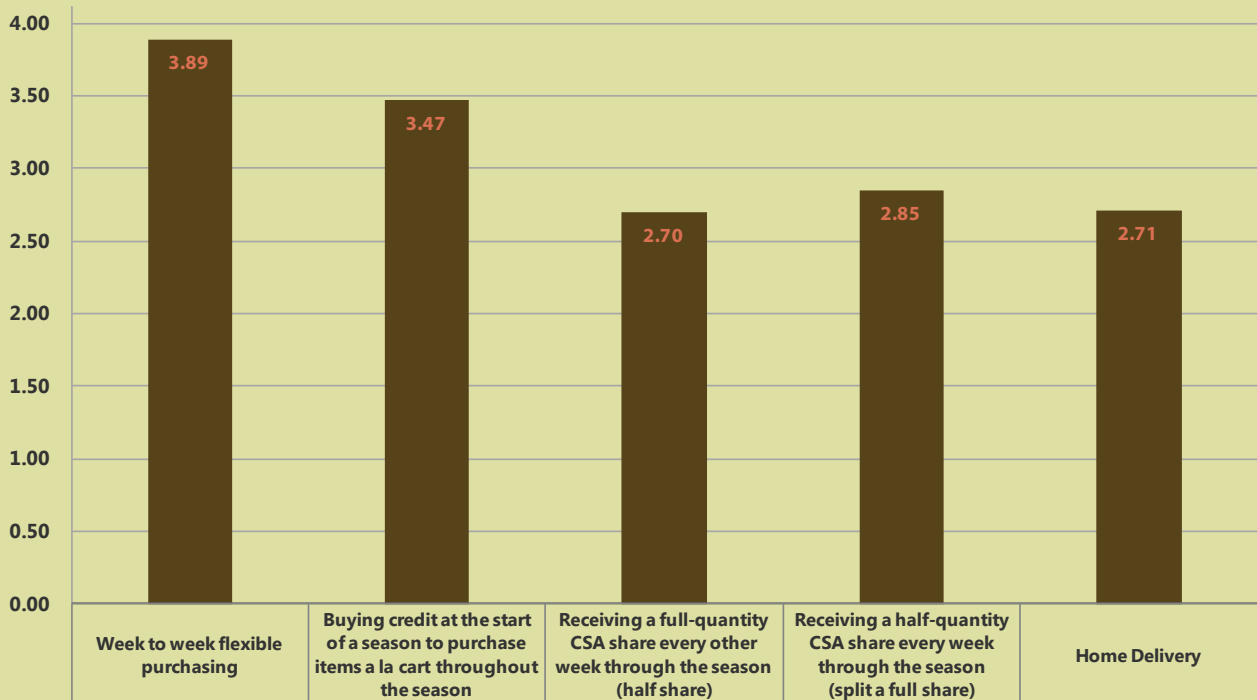
Larry marketed his flexible CSA through Facebook and Twitter. He would suggest share contents. Interested parties would custom-order a box containing the items they were interested in. Commitment was week to week. ***"Feedback was phenomenal. There was not a single negative comment about the CSA. People can get exactly what they want, they weeks they want it."*** Larry offered the flexible CSA for 20 consecutive weeks this year. He filled 12 to 20 \$20 boxes each week. Larry plans to expand the program a little bit in 2014.



Larry Cleverley

The Hohl family, which operates Harvestville Farm near Donnellson, added a week-to-week flexible CSA to their traditional CSA in 2013 as well. Adam Hohl says this first year was such a success, they plan to drop the traditional CSA next year and only have the flexible CSA. ***"Whatever we had ready to go in the season, we created a box and advertised on Facebook."***

Chart 4 - Interest in alternative CSA models for local produce.
(1 = Not Interested at All; 5 = Very Interested)



Evolution of the CSA (cont'd)

They sold 15 to 35 boxes weekly. The boxes were not customizable, but people were able to learn the contents on Facebook ahead of time. Many pre-ordered, and the Hohl family also had walk-in sales at the retail barn on their farm.

Adam: ***“The number one reason [customers] enjoyed this model was because they didn’t have to make a 16-week commitment or put money down up-front. If they were out of town, they didn’t have to worry about it.”*** In addition, during the season and depending on harvest, some boxes were themed, such as the fruit box or salsa box.

Farm Stand Debit Cards

Some farms are offering, in lieu of a traditional CSA box, farm stand debit cards where a customer purchases a pre-paid debit card at the beginning of the season to use at that particular farm. Similar to the idea of a CSA, the debit cards give farmers cash flow and guaranteed revenue in the spring, when they need it. Customers get to pick exactly the produce they want while still making a financial commitment to a farm, which will encourage them to eat healthy fruits and vegetables. Frequently the customer gets a discount, such as 10 percent, for purchasing a farm debit card. For example, if they pay \$250, they receive \$275 in produce.

Sara Hanson of Prairie Sky Farm, near Wesley, emails an availability list to her customer base. They select items off the a la carte menu, and she delivers their order to their front door.

Many Models Mean Many Options for Consumers

Some may feel CSA alternatives run counter to the reason CSAs originated, which is to create a relationship between the farmer and consumer. Traditional CSAs continue to be a great model for farms with the production, business and customer service skills



The Hohl family added a week-to-week flexible CSA to their traditional CSA in 2013. Adam Hohl (top row on the right) says this first year was such a success, they plan to drop the traditional CSA next year and offer only the flexible CSA.

to deliver a fulfilling and enriching experience. However, many existing CSAs in Iowa operate more like a subscription service than a joint journey on which the farmer and consumer embark; this is not bad, but not congruent with the “traditional” model either. Whatever the model a farm or consumer chooses, there are many and increasing options, allowing farmers and eaters alike the opportunity to choose the best model for their lives. ■

Online Extras

Read the survey questions and full list of responses online at:

// www.practicalfarmers.org/programs/Horticulture.php