

Approximately three months ago, my wife Kara asked me if I was interested in joining a CSA. I think my exact response was, "Huh? I don't even know what you're talking about." After first telling me what the acronym stood for (Community Supported Agriculture) and then explaining to me how it worked, I was actually shocked that 1) I had never heard of it and 2) I hadn't been a customer for years.

Well, if you're like I was, you don't know what a CSA really is either. At its core, it's a way for Austinites to receive fantastic organic vegetables, grown at a local Austin farm, on a consistent basis and at a reasonable price. So, to recap: organic vegetables, grown 10 miles from where I live, supporting a local farmer. Literally nothing bad about that!

We did our research and we chose Johnson's Backyard Garden. We like the fact that it's very family-oriented and all organic. Plus, we actually get invitations to various events like farm open houses, Dai Due supper clubs, and even notifications about recipes to try with our brand new vegetables. Also, we're reasonably lazy (or busy), and Johnson's has no work requirement (meaning that someone else will pick all of our vegetables for us).



The benefits of CSA for both the consumer and the farmer are almost endless. For the consumer, we get to try new vegetables that we've never experienced before. Really, when was the last time you bought kohlrabi? In this particular CSA, you'll get your fill of it! Additionally, you get the warm-fuzzy of supporting a local farmer and getting guaranteed picked-that-morning vegetables straight off the vine. Not to mention how great it is for the environment – it's just a truck taking boxes to drop-off points instead of airplanes or trains running cross-country while your vegetables "ripen."

For the farmer, the primary benefit is pure economics. There's a guaranteed market for ten weeks at a time, so the farmer knows exactly how much he can plant and harvest on a weekly basis without digging into his own pocketbook. Yes, there are farmers' markets in Austin that can provide some of the same consumer options, but every farmer in the area has the same climatic conditions. Therefore, there can be an abundance of radishes on any given week at a farmers' market – there's no guarantee that every farmer will be able to sell their entire week's crop. In the CSA, the farmer can split the week's harvest equally between all of the members' shares and know that all of it has been pre-sold. In this scenario, the Johnsons have approximately 200 members, but plan on doubling that growth in the next twelve months by beginning to farm the rest of the land that is currently used for grazing cattle.

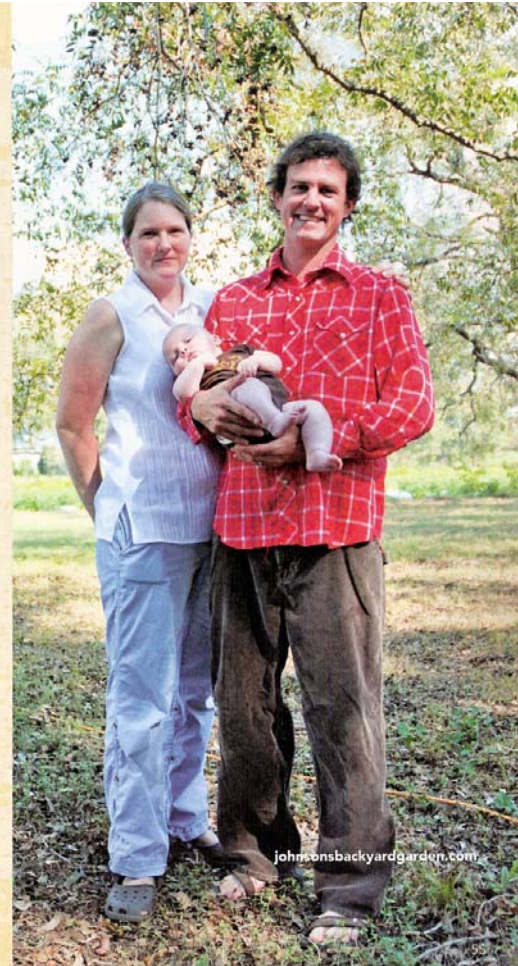


There are five 10-week sessions throughout the year (with two weeks off for the Johnson family). A CSA member can sign up for each session to receive a box of vegetables either every week or every other week. Weekly memberships run \$285 for the session and every-other-week memberships run \$150 (or \$28.50 and \$30 per box, respectively). There are ten pickup locations scattered throughout the city, so you choose your location and every Saturday afternoon, you swing by the pickup site, grab your box, sign for it and head home to make that eggplant pizza you've been craving!

The Johnsons even offer the option of adding one dozen cage-free farm-fresh eggs to your box or a pound of fair-trade Texas Coffee Traders coffee. That spinach omelet with a piping cup of coffee is sounding pretty good, right about now, huh?

To join the CSA or to find out more about Johnson's Backyard Garden, check out their website.

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