

CSA Co-Ops:

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Great Deals on Locally Grown and Locally Sourced Foods

Whether you have just one belly to fill or an entire household of bellies, grocery shopping is a chore that regularly tops the to-do list. Luckily, there are plenty of convenient ways to restock the kitchen these days, from online ordering to subscribing to a boxed meal kit service such as Blue Apron or Imperfect Foods. During the growing season, there is yet another easy way to get boxes of amazing produce and fresh food: Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) programs. Also known as local farm co-ops, CSAs keep dollars in the local economy by selling a “share” or a “membership” in exchange for locally grown and locally sourced foods. So, you get a great deal on fresh goods and support local farmers with every purchase.

For 95 years, VanOoteghem’s Farm and Greenhouse in Essexville has been growing and supplying fresh produce and flowers to the community and beyond. It began as a family sustenance farm in 1927 and has grown to become a 400-plus-acre farming operation with two seasonal greenhouse businesses. Mike VanOoteghem, now a fifth-generation farmer on the land, shares the responsibility of the operation with his parents, Ken and June, and his sister, Michelle Gearhardt.

“I love the growing aspect of our business,” he says. “This is truly what I enjoy. Our motto is ‘From seed to harvest.’ Everything is done in-house.”

And by everything, in true local farm co-op fashion, that’s a lot...

“We grow a large selection of produce including potatoes, cucumbers, pickles, sweet corn, cantaloupe, watermelon, onions, tomatoes, pumpkins, zucchini, squash, cabbage, and several other specialty items just for our CSA program,” VanOoteghem explained, noting that variety and freshness is a hallmark of Community Supported Agriculture. “Two customer favorites are our yellow watermelons and the sweet corn. They seem to go fast!”

Most CSA programs prepackage their weekly share, but VanOoteghem customers get to select what they want each week. For Saginaw resident Jen Rowley and her housemate, this CSA program is a perfect supplement to their small home garden. Although she has both volunteered and shopped at farm co-ops in Washtenaw County, this is her first subscription at the Essexville farm. She is pleased with the variety of fresh goods available each trip.

“They have been very generous with what we’re allowed to take. We are signed up to receive a half-bushel a week of fresh food,” she said. “Whatever we can fit into our little cart – all kinds of vegetables, herbs, and annual flowers.”

According to Fairshare CSA Coalition, a membership is beneficial in many ways. In addition to knowing where your food comes from and that it was grown and processed ethically and responsibly, many farms provide a newsletter with cooking tips, host special events and activities, and often offer payment plans.

One of the foremost benefits to a CSA program is cost. “On average, our program costs about \$23 per week,” said VanOoteghem. “Factoring in the rising cost of food, our customers should be seeing a cost saving in about 5-6 weeks.” For him, the most rewarding part about being a farmer is seeing the satisfied customers as they leave with their treasures. “The long hours and sweat are worth it when

a family comes in to pick out their weekly share and leaves with the kids digging out their cherry tomatoes for the ride home!”

Rowley and her housemate spent around \$300 for their membership and are looking forward to many bountiful trips to the VanOoteghem farm. “I have always been interested in farming, all natural foods and beauty aids,” she said. “I like the local farmers and co-ops; it feels like we’re a part of the community.”

Some customers potentially have even greater savings through the Michigan Farm to Family initiative (MF2FCSA) available at participating CSA farms. This program helps to strengthen communities and support local farming sustainability by encouraging SNAP/EBT recipients to consume fresh fruits, vegetables, and other farm products by allowing them to use food assistance benefits to cover 75 percent of the cost. The program works through local farmers and nonprofits in partnership with the Michigan Fitness Foundation and has been renewed in eight communities through 2024. It’s grant-funded, in part, by the National Institute of Food and Agriculture and the Gus Schumacher Nutrition Incentive Program. □

CSACoalition.org
VansGreenhouse.com

