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CONTACT: John Frady
(615) 837-5344
Jon.Frady@tn.gov
RETURN TO NEWSROOM

 Media Contact, Tom Womack, PIO
 Tenn. Dept. of Agriculture
 Ellington Ag Center, Nashville, TN 37204
 (615) 837-5118, Fax: (615) 837-5333
Tom.Womack@state.tn.us

“Community Supported Agriculture” Guarantees That Local Food is “In the Bag”

NASHVILLE, Tenn. - “Right now is the time for people who care about locally grown foods to buy their produce for the coming season,” says Tennessee Department of Agriculture marketing specialist Jon Frady.

Today, most of the fruits and vegetables of summer are still just a gleam in a farmer’s eye. Seeds are still in bags, tender young plants sit cozy and warm in their greenhouses, and fruit trees are just now showing off flirty blossoms to attract the bees and other insects which make pollination possible. Still, for a growing number of people, the summer’s best produce is already in the bag thanks to a relatively new concept called “Community Supported Agriculture”.

“That phrase is just a way to describe a business model that’s a complete win-win, both for the farmer who grows the food, and the person who buys it,” says Frady. “With the CSA concept, a farmer contracts with other people in the community to provide those individuals with a portion of the farmer’s harvest.

Time is running out, though, says Frady, to take full advantage of CSAs for the upcoming growing season. “Nature doesn’t wait on us to start her work, and farmers have to make decisions about what and how much to plant. In the next few weeks, seeds will be sown, plants set out and acreage spoken for, at least for the first crops of the summer,” says the specialist.

“If you joined a CSA, you’d pay the farmer up front, before the growing season begins, which allows the farmer to buy the necessary seed, fertilizer, fuel and other inputs necessary to farm for the year. Then, when crops start coming in, your fresh, local food is already bought and paid for. You might go out to the farm to pick up the food or just meet the farmer at a drop-off site in the community,” says Frady. “That just depends on the contract between the farmer and you.”

The increasingly popular direct growing and purchasing relationship gives producers a stable income and the fairest return on their products, according to

Frady. CSAs also keep food dollars—and beautiful farmlands-- in the local community.

“Typically,” says the marketing specialist, “a consumer who joins a CSA purchases a ‘share’ or a ‘half-share’ of the producer’s harvest in advance of the production season. Cost for a full-share averages about \$25 per week, but what constitutes a share depends on what the particular farm produces. The farmer usually provides a weekly half-bushel box of produce for a full share or a bi-weekly box for a half share at a convenient pick-up spot in the customer’s area.”

A spring-summer CSA share typically lasts about 25 weeks, from late May until early November, according to Frady. Consumers can expect to find “cool weather” crops like broccoli, asparagus, collards, turnips, lettuces, beets, onions, and radishes in early and late shares. By July and through mid-September, CSA members can expect their share boxes to include tomatoes, corn, eggplant, squash, peppers, green beans, watermelons, cantaloupes, potatoes and even blackberries or other fruits. Some herbs may be available year round, and many are bountiful throughout Tennessee’s long growing season.

“In addition to fruits and vegetables, it’s not unusual for customers to be able to request farm fresh eggs, milk and other local foods to be included with their share,” says Frady. “Even if the vegetable farmer doesn’t produce dairy, poultry or meat products, several neighboring producers may pool their diverse products to provide customers with a complete range of local foods.”

“Farmers have a strong sense of pride in their CSA businesses,” says Frady. “They have the trust and appreciation of the people who contract with them, so they work hard to keep those relationships. These CSA farmers typically are out in the fields to harvest either the day before or in the very early morning hours of a scheduled pickup day to ensure their customers receive the freshest produce available.” CSAs often include recipes in share boxes to help customers bring out the best in their produce.

“Find CSAs near you now at TDA’s Market Development Web site, www.PickTnProducts.org,” says Frady. “The Pick Tennessee Products Web site highlights fruits and vegetables as they come in season, and provides directories of the local farms that grow those products. Links to related Web sites, pick-your-own farms, orchards and the whole range of Tennessee’s local, farm-direct and artisan food products are also available at www.PickTnProducts.org.”

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Department of Agriculture
Ellington Agricultural Center
Nashville, TN 37204
615.837.5103