

Wanna share? The residents of Sunnyside do.

It's been one year since the Sunnyside, Queens CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) group started its first season. Since then, neighbors have become friends, a local farm has a stable income, and refrigerators have been overflowing with fresh vegetables. How does one small organization do so much for the community?

Community Supported Agriculture groups, commonly referred to as CSAs, are programs for people to support local farmers and receive fresh produce. Each CSA has a core group, or a group of people that act as the leaders and organizers of the CSA, that collects a set fee from every participating family before the growing season begins. The core group gives that money to a local farmer, who uses it to begin his crops for the year. Once the growing season begins, each family receives a percentage of produce from the farmer's yield. Generally there is a designated pickup area in the neighborhood where families can pick up their weekly share. There are many CSAs in neighborhoods throughout Queens, including Astoria, Forest Hills, Jackson Heights, and others.

In 2007, without a farmers' market or local food store in sight, Sunnyside was ripe for a CSA. Diane Kolack, the Sunnyside CSA's Core Group Coordinator in 2007, told me the story of its formation.

“In 2006, my husband and I participated in the Hellgate CSA, in Astoria,” Diane explained. “It was great to get the fresh produce, but having to drive out to Astoria to pick it up each week was a chore.” Diane started talking with friends in the neighborhood and found that many were interested in the prospect of a local CSA. Encouraged, she contacted Just Food, an organization that helps communities start CSAs.

“It turns out that several people from Sunnyside had gotten in touch with Just Food individually, all wanting to start a CSA,” said Diane. Just Food put her in touch with the others, and together they made plans for Sunnyside's first CSA season. This group of people formed the original core group for the CSA. Each group member has a different responsibility, ranging from dealing with finances, to facilitating communication, to coordinating volunteers. And unlike some CSAs, the Sunnyside core group members are all volunteers themselves.

“There are a lot of different models for CSAs,” Diane explained. “In some, there's one person who runs the entire program as a full-time job. In others, there are core group members who might receive a percentage of the administrative fees, or a reduced-price share.” But since it was the first year for the Sunnyside CSA, the core group wanted to focus its resources on getting the program up and running successfully, with some money left over for special activities or trips.

The Sunnyside CSA has partnered with Golden Earthworm Organic Farm for vegetables, and Briermere Farm for fruit. The basic share is for vegetables only, and members have the option of paying an additional fee for a fruit share as well. Share pickups occur once a week at the local community center, and each member is responsible for volunteering for 4 hours per season. Most volunteers oversee the pickup for a few hours, but organizing outings, working on the website, and other activities that help the CSA also qualify. These volunteer hours help the CSA to run smoothly and take a bit of work off the shoulders of the core group.

Besides delivering fresh produce to the neighborhood, the Sunnyside CSA runs several planned activities through the year so that members can get to know one another. Last year, one activity was a trip to the farm where the CSA gets all its produce. Members chatted with the farmers, explored the farm, and saw where their food really came from. CSA members also enjoyed a pot luck dinner and movie night. Attendees chatted with their neighbors and enjoyed one another's good cooking and conversation.

The CSA has a lot of benefits, leading people to join for a variety of reasons. For some, it's about the food. The Sunnyside CSA gets its vegetables from a 100% organic farm, so members can be assured that the veggies are fresh, in season, and chemical-free. Others join to show support for local farmers. And lots of CSA members join to meet other like-minded members of the community.

What's in the works for next year's CSA? All of the same, and hopefully a lot more, says Angie Sweigart-Gallagher, the Core Group Coordinator for 2008.

“This year we're hoping to host more events. Some event ideas we've been tossing around are recipe exchanges, pot lucks, and maybe an Iron Chef style cook-off,” said Angie. “We'd like for the CSA to be a way for people in the community to meet one another and come together. Local food may be the introduction, but I think we are hoping it will expand beyond the politics of food and eating to larger connections between people.”

Another goal for the Sunnyside CSA is to make this program accessible to families at all income levels, through partially-subsidized share prices.

“Last year we asked members for donations on the contract, and we received several donations. Unfortunately, our outreach efforts proved unsuccessful and we weren't able to make connections to appropriate individuals and families with the limited amount of time we had,” Angie explained. “This year, we are setting aside \$5 from our administrative fee and adding it to the donations we gathered from last season. We're hoping to work with Sunnyside Community Services or another community group with an established program that can help us in our efforts to pull in community members unable to pay the share price in full.”

The Sunnyside CSA will also likely increase the number of shares available, from 72 last year, to 100 this year. The exact number of shares, however, is determined by the farmer. With all available shares purchased quickly in 2007, and ever-increasing numbers of people showing interest for 2008, the Sunnyside CSA is guaranteed to stick around this community-minded neighborhood for years to come.

Want to learn more about the Sunnyside CSA? Visit their website: <http://www.sunnysidecsa.com/>

Want to start a CSA in your neighborhood? Learn more at Just Food: <http://www.justfood.org/jf/>