

By Julia Farwell-Clay

*Community Supported Agriculture has been popularized in the last decade by families looking for alternatives to the super in their market. The weekly ritual of driving out to the farm to pick up the share box full of organic vegetables with leaves and dirt intact, to shake the hand of that farmer supports small scale farming, open space, sustainability, and recovers part of the connection to nature that is completely erased from the stacks of plastic hydroponic lettuce cartons at the grocery store.*

Many knitters and spinners feel the same way about their wool. The Internet has expanded the horizon for information, availability, and options for yarn, and lately, those options have come to include a fiber culture version of the traditional CSA.

Susan Gibbs, a former television news reporter from Los Angeles once loved her hectic city life. “ I loved it, and I loved it, and I loved it, until the day when I didn’t love it anymore.” Needing a change of pace, Susan moved to the Hudson River Valley, bought an appealing little book on shepherding in a used book store, got a few sheep, and ultimately wound up with her growing flock on Martha’s Vineyard. Life on that island can be especially challenging for a farmer because everything must be brought over by boat, from lumber to hay. It was hard going, to the point where she wasn’t sure if she would be able to keep her animals. She came up with the idea of offering shares of her spring shearing in the form of a CSA on Etsy, and the idea took off.



Maggie Estrin from Vista, California bought a share for humane reasons. “It’s important for the fiber community to have sustainable and animal-friendly choices, and through her hard work, determination, and enthusiasm, Susan has given this amazing opportunity to all of us. Plus, I like telling people I have time-share goats!”

Since October of 2007, Susan has tripled the size of her flock (“You could say I was addicted”) and has developed an ardent fan base who write emails of support, attend shearings, drop in to meet the new babies, and often pitch in with the daily chores.

Jenny Clemens-Fox has made the trip to the island a few times from her Boston home. “My favorite part of this whole thing is the very personal experience I get. I’ve met the shepherds, I’ve met and sometimes bottle fed the flock and I know that every dollar of my money is going to something real and necessary. The end result, for me, will be a big bag of roving, and I will know exactly who the wool came from, not to mention the stories, the blessings and the tragedies of their lives, and I’ve gotten to be a small part of that whole little ecosystem”

Gibbs says farming on this scale wouldn’t be possible if her market was limited to the island, there couldn’t be enough demand to keep the flock afloat. But with the Internet, a virtual community as wide reaching as Alaska to Israel to support her farm, it is more than possible. In fact, it is so possible that she has plans for an adjunct flock in the Hudson River Valley to feed the fiber habits

of her subscribers in the greater New York area.

Local is still an important part of Gibbs' philosophy and she regularly advises people from all over the United States wanting to adapt her model to their own flock, though usually on a much smaller and more regional scale.



“CSA is a term frequently heard here in Vermont, and everyone knows the concept” says Kim Goodling, a homesteader from the Green Mountains. “We all support our local vegetable farms by purchasing CSA shares to help them.” Kim acquired about 15 Romney sheep to maintain the pastures on her family’s farm, and then became a fiber artisan to maintain the sheep. The idea of a yarn CSA popped up a year ago during a brainstorming session around a friend’s kitchen table, but it wasn’t until Kim sold yarn to fellow Etsy vendor Susan Gibbs and checked out Susan’s own shop that she believed other people would “get it.”

With Susan’s support and encouragement, Kim began her own CSA program in the spring of 2008, and it has helped with the farm’s finances. “It allowed me to pay for the milling expenses in advance and to put enough money aside to buy hay for the winter. We find that our expenses come in large chunks so it has been a challenge to come up with the money we need at certain times of the year.”

“Farmers are used to sharing information,” says former typesetter Vera Videnovich of Chicago.

Vera commutes four days a week to her farm in Bridgman, Michigan to work and to assemble the CSA deliveries for her big city customers. She also tends to her flock of what she calls “Michigan Mash-ups,” mixed breed sheep bred for farm life, with high butterfat milk, robust lambs, and soft fleece suitable for the yarn she hand spins and naturally dyes to sell at the farmer’s market next to her brothers’ eggs and tomatoes. When she lost her job last year, Vera was encouraged by a friend to extend their traditional CSA program to include yarn. Her success with the program was the difference, Vera says, between keeping and losing her sheep, whom she refers to fondly as “my girls.”



Jenny Clemens-Fox suggests that Susan Gibbs and her fellow CSA farmers make a larger impact than just providing good clean yarn. “With the rate at which local agriculture is being wiped out in this day and age, small farms need all the help they can get, and the surprisingly far-reaching splash Susan has made seems to have really inspired people to not only invest in her, but also in their own local farms, which is really great.”

Resources for CSA wool:

Vera Videnovich

<http://www.videnovichfarms.com/>

Kim Goodling

<http://www.grandviewfarmvt.net/>

Susan Gibbs

<http://marthasvineyardfiberfarm.com/>

Local Harvest serves as an index for local sources of organic wool products

<http://www.localharvest.org/>

*All photos: Susan Gibbs*