

## Growing green

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By Maria Connor

### Community-supported agriculture benefits growers, consumers

Every Tuesday, anticipation builds as families and individuals from La Jolla, Del Mar and Solana Beach pick up their boxes of locally grown, organic produce from Tierra Miguel Farm in Pauma Valley. Because availability of the fruits and vegetables changes according to season, those who subscribe to the community-supported agriculture (CSA) program never know what might be included.

"To me, when you get your box, it's like a mystery box," said Ann Jaffe of La Jolla.

As the winter growing season gets under way, the boxes are filled with hearty crops such as beets, carrots, daikon radish, kohlrabi, greens and yams.

"It's based on whatever we can grow in our climate," said CSA coordinator Shoshana Raskas, adding that the regional produce is supplemented with items such as citrus and potatoes, which don't do well in the soil here. "The new season is an opportunity for people who live in the area to get farm-fresh produce and support a local farm."

Jaffe said she has been a part of the program for three years for two reasons: as a registered dietician, she knows the importance of eating a variety of fresh fruits and vegetables, plus she believes in supporting local farmers.

"It brings diversity into your home," Jaffe said. "We're supposed to eat the colors of the rainbow. It's not easy to do unless it's delivered to your home."

A newsletter and online resources are provided for people who may find some of the produce "exotic." On one occasion, Jaffe went through her box, matching unfamiliar items up with the pictures in her newsletter. When she found herself left with a "mystery" vegetable, she called her sister, who identified the bulbous roots as kohlrabi. Jaffe added it to her family's salad bar that night and it disappeared.

"It's a great learning experience for the whole family," Jaffe said. "We taste things that I would not normally purchase."

While Barbara Sullivan of Del Mar enjoys the fresh taste and nutritional value of the Tierra Miguel harvest, her primary motivation is the green factor.

"I don't like the idea that you have to transport your vegetables ... over great distances," she said. "It's worth it to me to spend a little more money. You know they're taking care of the soil when they farm it instead of depleting it."

The CSA program - which delivers 15- to 18-pound boxes of produce to centralized pickup locations in La Jolla, Del Mar, Solana Beach and other San Diego communities - is just one of several initiatives supported by the Tierra Miguel Foundation, a nonprofit organization founded in 1999 to inform, educate and demonstrate "the value of local sustainable agricultural practices." An 85-acre demonstration farm serves as a production site and classroom.

"San Diego has a lot of farms, but we're ... open to the public," Raskas said. "We have field trips come to the farm, and we do outreach."

At 9 a.m. the first Saturday of each month, the farm hosts an open house. Visitors can pick whatever crop is in season,



Tierra Miguel Farm's community-supported agriculture (CSA) program brings seasonal, regional, organic produce to San Diego residents.



Educating students about organic produce and sustainable farming is one of Tierra Miguel Farm's primary goals.



The farm hosts an open house the first Saturday of every month, giving visitors a chance to harvest seasonal produce and share a potluck luncheon.

participate in a work project and enjoy a potluck lunch. They can also buy produce to take home from a farm stand.

Many people are surprised to learn that not all organic farms are created equal, Raskas said. Tierra Miguel uses biodynamic farming methods, the gold standard of organic agriculture practices, such as fertilizing with manure and compost and rotating crops.

"We're trying to look at the farm as a whole to make sure it's healthy and using as little external inputs as possible," Raskas said.

In an effort to raise awareness about healthy food choices, the Farm to School program enables schools to supplement their meal options with locally grown produce. This, combined with field trips to the farm, helps children appreciate the connection between growing and consuming fruits and vegetables.

That relationship - between farmer and consumer - has led to the development of a farmers cooperative called the San Diego Growers' Project. While the venture is still in the early stages, Raskas said the focus is multipronged: fresher produce, viable farming and a smaller carbon footprint on planet Earth.

"It provides another market for farmers so they can stay in business, and it ensures food security in the region," Raskas said.

Jaffe said she sees the entire country, but San Diego in particular, pushing for healthier farming and eating practices.

"It's time to take the leap," Jaffe said. "If you want to take care of San Diego County, you have to support the farmers now. We have to teach each other how to do it."

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