

NEW DENMARK — When Nancy Kellner started Kellner Back Acre Garden LLC near Denmark in 2006, eight shareholders invested in the farm.

She's seen steady growth and now has more than 100 shareholders supporting the operation that repays investors by dividing up produce, eggs and meat produced on the farm from April through October.

Kellner had been in the dairy business with her husband, Tom, for 17 years.

"We were dairy farming and the help just got hard to find," she said. "We were both working (off the farm) and I was into catering so it was 'Let's grow healthy, organic, food.'"

Kellner Back Acre Garden — and thousands of other growers — has adopted a model of production known as community-supported agriculture. The U.S. Department of Agriculture describes the model as one typically backed by a number of shareholders who "pledge in advance to cover the anticipated costs of the farm operation and farmer's salary."

The return on investment comes from a share of produce from the farm. But, like the farmer, shareholders assume the risk of crop failures and diminished harvests because of poor weather and other circumstances.

Shares at a pair of local CSAs ran from \$90 to \$250 for a half share or \$450 for a full share. In some cases, shareholders can also work on the farm four hours a week in return for produce.

Lisa Le Sage of Denmark spent time on the farm earlier this week pulling weeds.

Work on the farm is something she usually does with her 10-year-old daughter, Grace, who has gained some insight into farming.

"I thought it would be a good thing for both of us to do and a good experience for her. And for the vegetables too, of course," she said. "It's a lot of work ... but what we like is the different kinds of things we get to do. Grace has already said she wants to be a spinach farmer, or 'I want chickens or a cow.' So she's inspired."

Erin Barnett, director of LocalHarvest.org, said consumers go to CSAs for any number of reasons from getting access to fresher or organic foods to supporting a local farm or local rural economy. Some people want their kids to have a connection to agriculture.

"We see increasing growth and don't think we're anywhere near the saturation point," said Barnett, of Northfield, Minn.

"In the last 10 years it has just blossomed. There are dozens of new CSAs around urban centers in the Midwest, and CSAs are beginning to be found more commonly in small cities and even some smaller towns. The word is out."

LocalHarvest.org, a user-generated website cataloging CSA operations and farmers markets, counts more than 3,600 CSAs nationwide, though a full accounting has not been compiled, Barnett said.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture has no hard numbers, though a 2007 Census of Agriculture question indicated as many as 12,549 farmers nationwide had marketed products through a CSA.



Volunteer Lisa Le Sage of Denmark weeds a garden Tuesday at Kellner Back Acre Garden LLC, 5561 Cooperstown Road in New Denmark. More than 100 shareholders receive produce from the community-supported agriculture farm. Photos by H. Marc Larson/Press-Gazette

The CSA concept made its way to the United States from Europe in the 1980s and has been gaining momentum over the past 15 years.

Barnett said they are seeing some changes in the way CSAs operate, including weekly or monthly payment plans for shareholders and mail order operations from tropical fruits.

Diane Nichols, owner of Nichols' Gardens in the Oconto County town of Pensaukee, moved to the CSA model after farmers market participation yielded few sales.

She grew the business in four years from about 10 members to 24 last year before seeing a decline this season to 14 shareholders — something she attributes in part to the economy.

Nichols said aside from allowing her to be involved in a lifelong love of gardening, the CSA allowed her to work with, and educate, the public.

"People have said they ... tended to eat better even though they are not my customer anymore," she said. "They have learned vegetables and produce of all different kinds can taste so good when it's fresh, and since they've had it fresh they know what to look for."

Nichols said it's unlikely she will be back next season because of a health issue.

"I think I have educated a variety of people on what good Wisconsin produce tastes like," she said. "That's satisfying. And I'll continue to keep a little garden for myself."

The window to buy in for a season usually closes in the spring.

Kellner's operation is not USDA-certified organic, but it relies on the same practices — namely no pesticides or herbicides.

Weeding is done by hand, and everything on the farm is grown there, she said. The operation is eyeing the addition of an on-farm retail store as soon as 2011, she said.

Aside from planting and growing crops, Kellner and family members handle marketing, packaging and distribution of the produce to shareholders at several delivery sites around the area — as well as the associated paperwork. They also sell at Terry Naturally's summer market, 2625 Development Drive in Bellevue, from 3 p.m. to dusk Wednesdays.

"I think that's why a lot of people come out here, to see what we are doing and see that we don't spray anything," Kellner said. "It is labor intensive, but you have to have a love for the Earth. That's what Tom and I love. We love seeing things grow that you actually planted."