

## Workplace CSAs deliver fresh veggies to the office



Cheryl and Tom Thornton, owners of Cloud Mountain Farm, stand in front of apple blossoms at their Everson farm. Apples will be one of the fruits Cloud Mountain will provide to PeaceHealth St. Joseph Medical Center employees who have signed up to receive weekly deliveries of local produce at the hospital. Ryan Wynne | BBJ

by [Ryan Wynne](#)

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Farming is a tough industry at the whim of unpredictable factors. Take this spring for example — the wet and cold have kept many farmers from planting their crops.

“It has been difficult to get things in when we need to get things in,” Cloud Mountain Farm co-owner Cheryl Thornton said.

Some farmers are uncertain they will have a significant enough yield to offset costs while others fear they may not have a yield at all. Pair that with fluctuations in demand, and the industry becomes even more erratic.

Farmers may not be able to control the weather, but there is a way to take a bit of the uncertainty out of farming. Some farmers pre-sell produce using the community supported agriculture (CSA) method.

CSAs allow customers to pay a lump sum before a growing season begins in order to receive boxes of fresh produce throughout that season. This gives farmers insight into how much they should plant and helps offset the expense of planting.

“It’s really nice to have that kind of up front order and to know people have already paid for it,” Thornton said.

Over the last 25 years, CSAs have become an increasingly popular way for farmers to sell fruits and vegetables to individuals in the United States, and now that method is evolving into a form that has the potential to reach even more customers.

“I think it’s huge. I think it’s almost a little bit scary,” Terra Verde Farm co-owner Amy Fontaine said. “I think it has the potential to completely alter the scale of agriculture in the county.”

Fontaine was referring specifically to workplace CSAs, which allow employees to sign up for and receive weekly deliveries of fresh produce right at the office, sometimes with payment assistance from employers.

An increasing number of Whatcom County employers are participating in workplace CSA programs, including PeaceHealth St. Joseph Medical Center.

### **It takes a village...of farmers**

This year is PeaceHealth’s first as a CSA drop-off site. The medical center is participating in a workplace CSA pilot program. Employees pay \$500 for 20 weeks worth of produce from Fontaine at Terra Verde, Thornton at Cloud Mountain and owners of eight other local farms who have teamed up to form a cooperative specifically for the purpose of providing PeaceHealth with CSA shares.

With more than 2,700 employees, PeaceHealth is by far the largest private employer in Whatcom County and represents a lot of potential CSA customers.

So far, about 110 employees have signed up for the program. PeaceHealth CSA organizers hope to get that number up to 150 this year and organizers hope to significantly increase PeaceHealth participation next year.

One small farm alone would have a hard time providing produce to that many customers — for reference, Fontaine is hoping to have 40 to 50 CSA customers this year.

If the number of participants gets into the multiple hundreds, or even thousands, farmers will have to bump up production, Fontaine said. That would be good for county agriculture, which is already a \$613 million industry. However, it would be tough for individual local farmers, with small plots, to manage on their own, Fontaine said.

Having a group of farmers to fill orders takes the pressure off of individuals and enables them to meet demand, Thornton said. And delivering to multiple customers at a single drop-off site saves farmers time and money.

It has another benefit, too: farmers can fill boxes with a wider variety of fruits and vegetables.



Tom Thornton, Cloud Mountain Farm co-owner, stands among 1,000 tomato plants at his farm in Everson. Ryan Wynne | BBJ

### **An easy sell**

In order to initiate the CSA program at PeaceHealth, Chris Philips, director of community affairs and strategic communication for the medical center, had to determine where 150 boxes of produce could be dropped off.

Philips approached the center's facility director in hopes he would identify and approve a drop site. The meeting went better than expected — the facility director signed up and became the first PeaceHealth CSA customer.

In fact, everyone Philips had to get approval from to initiate the program has signed up for it.

The program has been an easy sell, in part, because it aligns with the hospital's mission to promote personal and community health, Philips said. Fresh food contributes to personal health and buying it from local farmers supports community health, he said.

"I think it's fundamentally good for the community, good for people who work here and good for the medical center," Philips said. "When employees feel like we are caring

about the community and caring about them, they feel like they are part of something they can be proud of.”

Rachel Akins, a clinical dietitian at PeaceHealth, is also helping to organize the medical center’s CSA program, but before the PeaceHealth program, she participated in CSA programs on her own for several years.

“I wanted to support local farmers and eat healthier and I wanted my family to know what real food looked like,” Akins said. “I feel like it’s my responsibility to show them.”

Eating fresh, whole foods is one of the best ways to maintain and improve health, she said — the less time that passes between when produce is harvested and when it’s eaten, the more nutrients it has.

And workplace CSAs give employees more free time because their groceries are delivered directly to them.

“They are really excited to pick up a box of local produce at work instead of having to stop at the grocery store on the way home,” Akins said.

Workplace CSAs have the potential to create more job satisfaction, and in the case of PeaceHealth, at no cost to the organization.

PeaceHealth is one of at least 14 employers participating in a workplace CSA program, said Mariah Ross, Sustainable Connections business development manager, and three of those employers are actually subsidizing the cost of their employees’ CSAs. Others have created payroll deduction systems — employers pay the upfront cost and employees pay that amount back through individual paychecks. This system increases participation.

“When businesses do add the benefit of a payroll deduction, participation goes up exponentially,” Ross said.

### **Planting the seeds for growth**

For small, direct-market farmers, avenues for sales are limited, said Laura Ridenour, Sustainable Connections food and farm program manager. CSAs create an important market outlet for those producers, she said, and workplace CSAs are another piece of that.

The workplace CSA model is coming at the right time, as the market for selling CSAs directly to individuals has become a bit saturated, Fontaine from Terra Verde Farm said.

The workplace model opens up a fresh market for local producers. When CSAs are sold in the workplace, the idea of buying directly from local farmers reaches the ears of people who may have never considered that as an option.

This model, and the market it opens, has the potential to take some of the pressure off of farmers, Fontaine said.

“It’s a bit of a hard life, a hard career, and I think securing clients like this, it’s just really profitable for a lot of people,” Fontaine said. “It’s real income for people.”

Fontaine said she and her husband, Skuter, who also owns the farm, are on the verge of being able to support a family on their farming income. And if workplace CSAs succeed, they would probably get the boost needed to make supporting a family possible.

In fact, if workplace CSAs reach their maximum potential, local farmers would need to significantly scale up to meet demand, Fontaine said — either that, or join cooperatives similar to the one Fontaine is a part of that will be supplying PeaceHealth with its CSA shares.

“We are not all competing with each other. We are banding together,” Fontaine said. “None of us could do it on our own — not at this level.”

Producers have to be ready, she said. The consumer interest is here and the timing is right. If the model takes off, local farmers will be producing a lot of food.

“I wanted to support local farmers and eat healthier and I wanted my family to know what real food looked like. I feel like it’s my responsibility to show them.” Rachel Akins, PeaceHealth dietician

If every PeaceHealth employee decided to join the CSA next year, a lot of local farmers would be busy around the clock. That type of participation is unlikely, especially considering natural limits at the facility, such as space for boxes.

Still, Thornton is hoping more PeaceHealth employees will join the program next year — a lot more employees.

“We are already hoping that next year we will have 500 members or 1,000 members,” she said. “Wouldn’t that be amazing?”

At the same time, Ross at Sustainable Connections expects the number of businesses offering CSA programs to continue to grow if the current trend continues. There may only be 14 businesses offering CSA programs this year, but that number is more than three times higher than the number of businesses Ross knows of that participated last year.

“I think that’s a really positive sign,” Ross said. “I think there is huge opportunity.”