

# THE IMPORTANCE OF COLLABORATIVE FARMING

## LESSONS FROM BUFFALO'S MULTI-FARM CSA PILOT PROGRAM

### WHY DOES IT MATTER?

If you're a small, urban, and/or historically underserved farmer, chances are you've faced at least one of the following:

- Unpredictable sales and limited access to steady markets
- High labor costs with little administrative support
- Barriers to reaching new customers outside your immediate network
- Burnout from managing everything — growing, marketing, packing, delivery



### COLLABORATIVE CSA OFFERS A DIFFERENT PATH

pool crops, share responsibilities, and coordinate marketing and distribution through collective action



scale together in a way that prioritizes community health, farmer sustainability, and collective impact

### STEPS FOR A COLLABORATIVE APPROACH

*This step-by-step guide draws from the Buffalo pilot CSA experience to help urban growers, nonprofits, and food justice advocates launch a multi-farm CSA in their own cities.*

#### STEP 1: ESTABLISH A CORE GROUP

**Who to include:** Farmers, community partners, food access organizations, technical advisors

**How to begin:** Host informal meetings or listening sessions to discuss shared goals

**Tip:** Prioritize inclusion of historically underserved farmers and communities from the start

#### STEP 2: ALIGN ON SHARED VISION & VALUES

- Define the purpose of the CSA (e.g., profit sharing, food justice, environmental impact)
- Set guiding principles for collaboration, transparency, and equity
- Use visioning tools or facilitated exercises to surface priorities

#### STEP 3: DEVELOP A GOVERNANCE & OPERATIONAL PLAN

- Determine roles and responsibilities (e.g., CSA coordinator, packing lead, outreach liaison)
- Draft and sign MOUs or participation agreements
- Decide on:
  - Number of shares and pricing
  - Distribution schedule and locations
  - Quality standards and packing protocols

#### STEP 4: PLAN PRODUCTION COLLABORATIVELY

- Use a shared crop plan or bidding system to divide crop responsibilities
- Ensure a diversity of produce across farms
- Plan planting timelines around harvest and distribution dates

#### STEP 5: SECURE RESOURCES

- Funding: Apply for grants, seek sponsorships, or partner with local funders
- Infrastructure: Identify aggregation space, refrigeration if needed, and delivery options
- Outreach: Budget for printed materials, translation, and tabling events

#### STEP 6: LAUNCH COMMUNITY OUTREACH

- Promote CSA shares via social media, flyers, and community events
- Partner with trusted community leaders to build relationships
- Provide materials in multiple languages and include:
  - What's in a CSA share
  - How to cook/store food
  - Pickup logistics and support options

#### STEP 7: PILOT THE CSA PROGRAM

- Keep it small for your first season (e.g., 40–60 shares over 8–10 weeks)
- Maintain weekly communication among farms
- Track produce harvested, boxes packed, hours worked, and community engagement

#### STEP 8: COLLECT AND ANALYZE DATA

- Track:
  - Labor, income, and expenses
  - Member demographics
  - Feedback and stories
- Use simple spreadsheets or tools like Google Forms

#### STEP 9: REFLECT AND REFINE

- Hold an end-of-season debrief with all partners
- Discuss what worked, what was hard, and how to improve
- Update your agreements and plans for next season

#### STEP 10: SHARE YOUR STORY

Your experiences can help other farmers!

- Offer to mentor other farmer groups or cities interested in this model
- Contribute to a growing movement of collaborative, just, and community-rooted food systems

