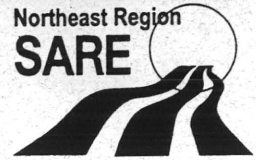


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Community-Supported Agriculture: Organizing a Successful CSA

Community-Supported Agriculture is an innovative approach to creating a fresh, local food supply. In the mid-1980s, U.S. growers and consumers started Community-Support Agriculture (CSA) farms in an effort to develop a system that would provide consumers with a local supply of fresh food and a fair price to growers, and would offer opportunities for farmers and their customers to have a personal relationship.

In its simplest sense, Community-Supported Agriculture is a relationship of mutual commitment between grower and consumer. The grower agrees to provide a wide variety of fresh produce throughout the growing season. The consumer agrees to purchase a "share" of the harvest, usually enough for a household of two adults, at a set price.

There are now nearly 1,000 CSA farms in the U.S. with a combined membership of well over 100,000 households and total receipts of \$35-50 million a year.

How Does a CSA Work?

Budget

The grower draws up a budget that reflects production costs for the year. This consists of wages (including the grower's salary), seeds, soil amendments, equipment, supplies, land cost, insurance, fees, etc. The resulting figure is divided by the number of people that the farm site can provide for.

This determines the price of a "share." Share prices, therefore, vary from farm to farm. They often range between \$350 and \$600 for a season-long supply of mixed vegetables. At an average of about \$15 per week for fresh, local, and usually organically grown produce, CSA costs are comparable and often less than the cost of buying the same food at a supermarket.

Members pay in advance to provide the grower with spring startup costs. Many farms offer installment plans allowing for three to four payments

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during the season. To enable people of differing financial means to participate, farms may offer full or partially subsidized shares and accept food stamps. Some farms also provide shares directly to food banks, soup kitchens, or community pantries. Many CSAs have "work shares" and exchange labor for some part of the cost of produce. Work-share members may assist with field work, harvest, distribution, communication, or other needed services.



The late Robyn Van En, pictured with Hugh Ratcliff, was one of the pioneers of the CSA movement in the United States.

Members share the risks of production with the CSA grower. A hail storm that damages leaf crops may reduce a member's share of lettuce for one week. On the other hand, a warm, sunny period may produce a bumper crop of early tomatoes whose bounty is divided among the members.

Variety

Most CSAs provide a wide variety (often 30 to 40 kinds) of vegetables, herbs, and sometimes fruit. Some CSAs offer beef or lamb. Having animals may require more land for pasture, but the animals also provide more on-farm organic matter for soil! Others have tree fruit, berries, honey, eggs, bread, and flowers, or network with nearby farms producing these items. Crops are planted in succession to provide a continuous weekly supply of mixed produce.

CSAs are varied in their approach. Not all CSAs are CSA-only farms. Some maintain established wholesale markets or accounts with local restaurants and food co-ops, while others participate in farmers' markets. A business plan is a helpful tool for growers to assess the best enterprise and marketing mix for their operation.

Land

The number of acres in production on a typical CSA farm varies but tends to be less than 10. Land tenure or holding arrangements differ among farms. In addition to family or private ownership, some CSA growers lease private or public land, are part of land trusts, or are organized under the umbrella of nonprofit organizations.

Distribution

Membership numbers vary among CSAs. Larger farms may have 500 members, while mixed-market and smaller CSAs may have 15 to 30. In either case, distributing produce to dozens, or hundreds, of members each week takes good organization and logistical management. Some CSAs distribute all produce at the farm by having members weigh out a certain amount of each available item. Other

Food System Sustainability

The late Robyn Van En, co-founder of the organization, Community-Supported Agriculture of North America, made a film in 1986 that captures the social and cultural implications of CSAs in the title, *It's Not Just About Vegetables*. In addition to providing a regional fresh food supply, CSA farms are providing much needed education about our food system, building community, and keeping food dollars close to home to strengthen rural economies. In some cases, CSAs are also training the growers of tomorrow. For example, the CRAFT Program (Collaborative Regional Association for Farmer Training) in Massachusetts is a cooperative farmer education project in which twelve farms—including CSAs and other farms growing for direct market—provide on-site training for interns through a highly successful, intensive farm-to-farm education program.

CSAs bag the share and have it available on the farm or at an in-town site for pick up. Over the years, many farms have implemented a "mix and match" system to allow people to take the vegetables they like most. For example, instead of instructing members to take 1 pound each of 10 to 15 items, members bag flexible amounts—such as 3 pounds of root vegetables, 3 pounds of leafy greens, etc.—allowing the member more choice. Efficiency of distribution is good CSA management. Choice helps maintain member satisfaction.

Community and Communication

Newsletters are one way for growers to communicate with members and provide information about the season's produce; production practices; recipes for special crops; and updates on the farm, distribution, and member events.

Harvest festivals, work and play days, and seasonal celebrations provide an opportunity for

At the 5-year point of one long-range study of ten New England CSAs, average net CSA income was found to be similar to average net income for all farms in the same region despite smaller acreage.

members and their children to participate in farm activities and build a sense of community. Through on-farm events, members make a direct connection with their food, and get to know the grower who grows it and the land where their food is grown.

Economic Viability

CSAs can be small or large, and part or all of a given farm. Whatever the enterprise, if a CSA reflects true costs of production in the price of a share, economic

success is more likely. In fact, a long-range study of ten New England CSAs indicates that average net CSA income can be similar to average net income for all farms in the same region despite the smaller average acreage.

The CSA budget below is taken from a well-established and highly successful CSA in Massachusetts that is now 6 years old. Members have encouraged the CSA to provide the grower with health insurance, social security, and/or retirement plans. This CSA budget also includes depreciation on buildings and equipment. Many CSAs are moving in the direction of providing employment benefits to ensure economic security for the growers and the longevity of the farm.

Example of a Budget for a Well-Established CSA Farm (7-month season)

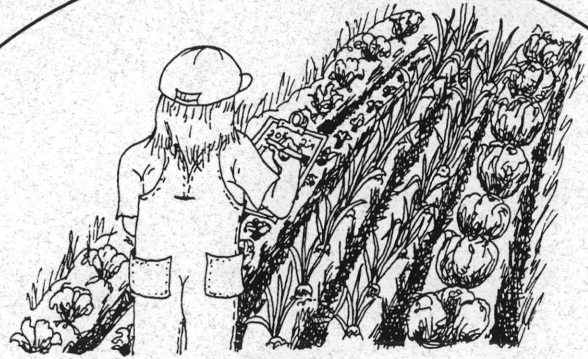
Soil amendments	\$1,200
Seeds and plants	1,300
Hay and straw	900
Maintenance and repair	950
Depreciation (buildings)	3,450
Utilities	475
Supplies	1,400
Diesel, gas, and propane	500
Depreciation (machines & office)	3,437
Co-farmer #1 Salary (wife)	13,475
Co-farmer #2 Salary (husband)	13,475
Labor hired	500
Apprentice stipends & Social Security	8,400
Apprentice's room and board	6,300
Workers' compensation insurance	1,200
Health insurance	3,700
Retirement plan	2,695
Taxes and liability insurance	1,100
Administration and office	1,300
Service on accumulated deficit	1,312
Reserve on contingencies (2%)	1,341
Total expenses	\$68,410
Total income*	68,460

*Based on total of 118 shares at \$572 per share.

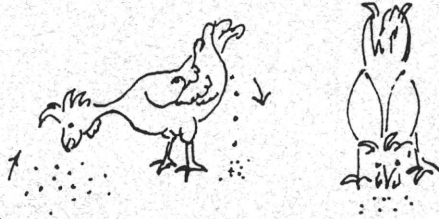
Pathway to a Successful CSA



Clarify Purpose and Goals

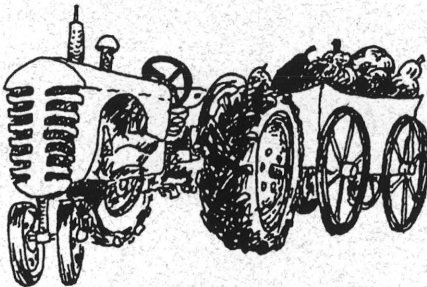


Implement Sustainable Production Practices



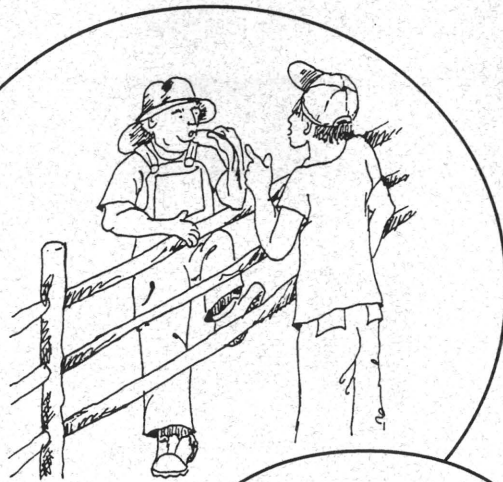
Develop a Base of Members

Create a Harvest and Distribution System

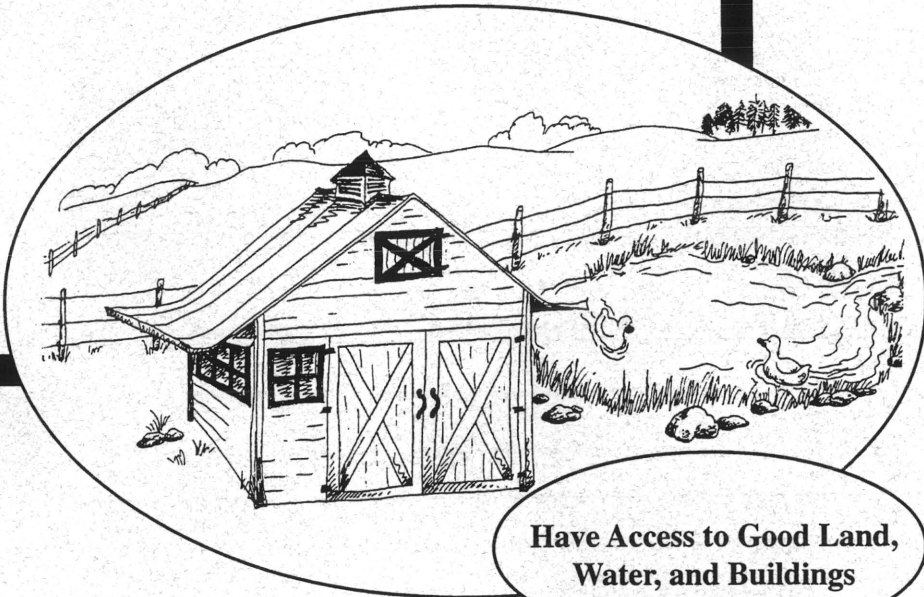


Establish a Core Group

**Develop a
Business Plan**



**Network with
Other Farmers**



**Have Access to Good Land,
Water, and Buildings**

**Provide
Fresh Food**



CSA growers have found that the steps outlined in this illustration contribute significantly to success in providing a fresh, local food supply through their CSA. These efforts ultimately help growers to develop an "infrastructure" of personal, farm, and natural resources as a strong foundation for the CSA; create a dependable membership base as a market for the farm's products; and set up systems to support food production/harvest/distribution as well as member information and communication.

**Resources/Infrastructure:
Personal, Material, and
Natural Resources**



**Market or Membership
Development**



**Systems Development:
Support/Information
Production
Harvest
Distribution
Member Retention**



**Local
Food Supply**

Suggestions for a Successful CSA

No two CSA farms are alike. One of the benefits of a CSA is its ability to be individually designed for a particular farm, growers, community, and set of members. The following how-to ideas are based on what some CSAs have found to be successful given their particular farm situation.

Production

CSAs encourage sustainable production and good land stewardship practices. Before starting a CSA:

- Learn how to grow a variety of vegetables and herbs successfully in specific amounts.
- Visit and talk to other CSA growers about their experiences.
- Build healthy soil.
- Make sure you have access to a good water supply and a site for distribution.
- Incorporate as many inputs as possible directly from the farm.
- Extend your growing season with a greenhouse and by growing some produce that can be kept in winter storage.

Membership

A CSA isn't for every grower. Recruiting, communicating with, and satisfying members is a real art. Maintaining CSA members from one year to the next significantly cuts down on overall time and

Word of mouth is one of the most successful forms of CSA advertising.

costs of recruitment. Successful CSAs often retain 80% to 90% of members after a few years. While most early CSA growers carry out most recruitment and member retention activities, many current CSAs have developed a "core group" of



CSA members weigh produce at the distribution site.

members who support the CSA by taking on some of these CSA-related responsibilities. These members may receive some price reduction on their share, or volunteer their time out of commitment to the farm, grower(s), and/or overall CSA concept.

In a 1996 study of Vermont CSAs, Leslie Pelch drew these conclusions about finding and maintaining satisfied CSA members:

- Word of mouth is the most successful form of advertising.
- Education level rather than income is the most significant determinant of membership.
- Members, for the most part, are very satisfied with most of their CSA experiences.
- People end their membership for reasons most often related to unfamiliar types of produce, too large quantities, and/or inconvenience of picking up the share.

To recruit members, Pelch recommends:

- Use word of mouth to the fullest extent possible among current members, friends, colleagues, and neighbors.
- Ask members to invite friends to a CSA social/information event and to spend a few hours at local co-ops, farmers' markets, and food events to provide face-to-face information about Community-Supported Agriculture.
- Use personal statements on posters, flyers, and in newspaper stories.
- Consider convenient in-town drop-off sites for share pick up; offer delivery at an extra cost.

Another successful recruitment strategy for CSA growers is to use personal connections. Your current farm stand, farmers' market booth, or restaurant account, for example, are places to post an attractive sign with farm photos and to hand out flyers to customers. Ask owners or managers if you can place brochures in restaurants and grocery markets that already serve your food. Seek out "logical allies"—neighbors, religious organizations, workplaces, schools, etc.—who may already know you and your farm.

The Future of Community-Supported Agriculture

With an increasingly industrial food system that isolates consumers from growers and diverts local food dollars to corporate headquarters, more and more people are seeking alternatives. CSAs ensure a more direct relationship between people and their food, increase the ability of growers to succeed financially, and provide a way to maintain the integrity of rural communities while building a healthy future for our families, farms, and food system.

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lege, Center for Sustainable Living, 1015 Philadelphia Avenue, Chambersburg, PA 17201, (717) 264-4141 x3247.

National CSA Newsletter

- *The Community Farm: A Voice for Community Supported Agriculture*, 3480 Potter Road, Bear Lake, MI 49614. Jim Sluyter and Jo Meller, (616) 889-3216.

Videos

- *CSA: Making a Difference* (1997). Video, information handbook, and slide show on CSA development and promotion. Robyn Van En Center for CSA, Wilson College, Center for Sustainable Living, 1015 Philadelphia Avenue, Chambersburg, PA 17201, (717) 264-4141 x3247.
- *It's Not Just About Vegetables* (1986). No longer available; borrow existing copies from CSA farmers or Wilson College (immediately above), (717) 264-4141 x3247.

Internet

- <listproc@prairienet.org>: Internet discussion group on all aspects of Community-Supported Agriculture for farmer and members. To subscribe, type the following in the body of the message: subscribe CSA-L your e-mail address

Northeast Organizations

- CRAFT (Collaborative Regional Association for Farmer Training); contact Sam Smith, Williamstown, MA 01267, <caretakerfarm@ephs.org>, (413) 458-4309. Provides intensive farm-to-farm training for future farmers.

- CSA Works, Michael Docter and Linda Hildebrand, 115 Bay Road, Hadley, MA 01035, (413) 528-0013. Provides assistance in locating tools and techniques for CSA enterprises and an excellent Crop Planning Guide for determining amounts of seed, acreage, and projected yields.
- E.F. Schumacher Society, Bob Swann and Susan Witt, 140 Jug End Road, Great Barrington, MA 01230, (413) 528-1737; <www.schumachersociety@org>. Extensive library of decentralist thought. Offers *A New Lease on Farmland: Assuring A Future for Farming in the Northeast* with model leases created between conservation groups, land trusts, and farmers available.
- Equity Trust, Inc., Chuck Matthei, 539 Beach Pond Road, Voluntown, CT 06384, (860) 376-6174. Offers a revolving loan fund for CSA farms to acquire and develop agricultural land. Provides technical assistance and advice to CSA farms on land tenure.
- Just Food, Kathy Lawrence, 625 Broadway, Suite 9C, New York, NY 10012, (212) 674-8124. Facilitates CSA arrangements between rural CSA farmers and NY city consumers/members. Committed to low-income accessibility.
- New England Small Farm Institute, 275 Jackson St., Belchertown, MA 01007, (413) 323-4531. Resource Center and Library with CSA, farm planning and technical materials, courses, and workshops.
- Robyn Van En Center for Northeast CSA, Wilson College, Center for Sustainable Living, Steve and Carol Moore, 1015 Philadelphia Avenue, Chambersburg, PA 17201, (717) 264-4141 x3247. A major source of CSA information.

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