

THE COMMUNITY FARM

A Variety of Community Supported Agriculture

Winter 2002

Candlemas

The Multi-Farm CSA

COOPERATING WITH OTHER FARMERS CAN BENEFIT YOU AND YOUR SHAREHOLDERS

“Variety is the soul of pleasure” according to Aphra Behn. The array of vegetables that community supported agriculture (CSA) farms provide is an important part of the appeal of our farms. But veggies are only a part of anyone’s diet. Some farms can offer more variety than others, but any farm might benefit from cooperating with others. In the Summer 2001 *Community Farm* (“More than just Veggies”) the concept of collaborating with other farms was mentioned; here are some reasons to try it and examples to illustrate ways to accomplish it.

Why Have a Cooperative CSA?

Creating a multi-farm or cooperative CSA will increase the complexity of your CSA operation and coordinating the distribution of new products from other producers can be an administrative burden. But there are many benefits to the farmer and to farm members alike. The Common Wealth CSA in Massachusetts has found that teaming up helps reduce the loneliness of the one-person farm and has benefits for the small and large producer. The cooperative CSA offers a larger farm an additional market. Small farms that might otherwise find it difficult to consistently produce the quantity and variety necessary for an effective CSA can work with a larger “anchor” farm or find a consistent market for the modest output of a farm that operates part time. The coop allows farms to compensate for crop shortages and abundance between the different farms.

Farm members benefit from an increased variety of goods from local sources. If several farms are providing a similar mix of produce, the risk to farm members is reduced. Depending on the situation the multi-farm CSA might lengthen the season that produce is available and increase the number of people involved in local agriculture.

Wagbo Peace Center

Rick and Tracy Meisterheim have been providing a mix of products that includes vegetables, herbs, maple syrup and chickens for several years from their farm at Wagbo Peace Center in Michigan. Last year they decided to add more variety to the list by adding products from other farms and producers. Their motivation goes beyond increasing their member’s satisfaction or broadening the base of local food markets (see sidebar). Both their colleagues and their members responded enthusiastically and last year the following options were added: raspberries, cut flowers, sweet corn (not part of the “regular” veggie mix), several varieties of meat (including rainbow trout), honey, eggs, milk products (including ice cream), bread and shitake mushrooms. They hired a coordinator (funded in part by a grant from SARE) to set up the program and as the “host farm” they handle all of the finances and distribution.

The additional variety was available both to their existing farm members and to the community at large. By offering all of the selections beyond their regular farm members, they have exposed more people to CSA and made it easier to fill the available shares.

Since the whole concept of CSA was new to many of the producers, the first contact letter went into



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Writing Grants/Growing Nitrogen

By Susan Sauter, Flying Ewe Farm

Do you consider yourself a scientist? No, neither do I, but if you are a farmer or gardener, then you have what it takes—and you've probably been trying things out all along in your fields, in your gardens, or on your animals. Put that wherewithal together with the Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) "Farmer-Grower" (*Producer*) grants, and you just might be able to get some funding to try out your ideas—especially if they've never been tried before.

That's what I did last year. I wrote a grant called "Two approaches to farm-grown nitrogen" to try both using my own home-grown alfalfa/clover hay as a high-nitrogen dry mulch on my vegetables and my own in-garden grown alfalfa/clover as a high-nitrogen wet mulch on my basil. This would be different from the usual scheme of legumes grown for their nitrogen fixation. Sure, I'd get some of that benefit as well, but I needed a quick organic, solution to correct nitrogen deficiencies throughout the active growing season—especially for basil of which I grow lots but which takes on a yellow pallor as the season stretches on. I also wanted a cheaper solution than buying any number of expensive off-farm organic supplements. So maybe I could grow my own.

Consulting with our grant's technical advisor, someone SARE insists you must have as a condition of the grant, we established a 2 acre legume hayfield this year for part of the experiment. Boy, did we learn a lot—if nothing else, this moved us into another dimension of farming, i.e., caring for and cultivating larger acreage. It also taught us about using the right equipment for a job. I don't know how many calls I made researching the kind of seeder needed to finely seed and seat that two acres or how many I made regarding the appropriate mower to use that wouldn't knock off the tiny but high-in-nitrogen legume leaves once it was time to make the hay. These difficulties were unforeseen when I wrote the grant.

We made the mistaken assumption that because we lived in a farming community, we'd just be able to borrow the right equipment from a knowledgeable and experienced neighboring farmer. We quickly learned that no one around here had ever grown legume hay before. No one had the right fertilizer spreader. No one had the right seeding equipment. But we did find the right mower. We were still successful in establishing this field. We made do with a spreader intended for granulated not powdery fertilizer; I hand seeded the field with a broadcast spreader; my husband fabricated a roller out of a water-filled wine barrel for me to drag behind our all-terrain type vehicle to compress the seed into the soil. And in early September, 94 bales of our own legume hay was cut, baled and stacked. Because we only got this one cutting and fairly late in the season, we don't have results from this part of the grant, but I'll continue the project next year, using weekly tests to see how quickly the nitrogen from the dry mulch hay is released. I have great hopes for good results—not only will I be suppressing weeds, but I'll be feeding the vegetables a slow-release nitrogen—and adding organic matter.

I consider the other part of the experiment a great success. In the future, I will always grow alfalfa

or clover around my basil as I did this year. Over the course of 10 weeks, I cut the legume strips 3 times with a side-discharge lawnmower when they reached a height of about 8-10 inches, but I found the clippings were better applied by hand after they were bagged instead of blowing them into the basil row. Otherwise the basil leaves developed a blemish where the wet material hit. The weekly soil and basil leaf nitrogen tests showed an increase fairly soon after the wet legumes were applied—2-7 days. My own observation noted that I only had to apply fish emulsion once during the 10 weeks, something I would normally do 4-5 times over the season.

So why not try your hand at a SARE grant? Mine was only 6 pages long, and two of those were budget pages. The four regional SARE offices accept grant applications from farmers to support innovative, exploratory projects to enhance the sustainability of farms and farming. SARE also funds *Research and Education* and *Professional Development* Projects. The timing varies from region to region.

Information at <http://www.sare.org/htdocs/sare/funding.html> or contact Valerie Berton, SARE Communications Specialist, USDA-SARE, 10300 Baltimore Ave., Bldg. 046 BARC West, Beltsville, MD 20705; (301) 504-5230; email <mailto:vberton@wam.umd.edu>.

The *On-Farm Research Guide* is a resource for research design and implementation. PDF format at <http://www.ofrf.org/research/index.html> or by mail from Organic Farming Research Foundation, P.O. Box 440, Santa Cruz, CA 95061 831-426-6606

The Importance of Small Family Farms

More than 60 percent of U.S. farms (which include any enterprise with more than \$1,000 in agricultural sales annually) ended 1998 with a profit, according to USDA Agriculture Information Bulletin No. 768, *Structural and Financial Characteristics of U.S. Farms: 2001 Family Farm Report* By Robert A. Hoppe, editor (May 2001). For the most part, large and very large family farms were viable businesses, but small farms (those with sales of less than \$250,000) were found to be less viable. Most small farms did not report adequate income to cover expenses in 1998. Like their nonfarm counterparts, many farm households are dual income.

Though often unprofitable, the report continues, small farms “remain important to U.S. agriculture.” They accounted for 33 percent of the value of total agricultural production in 1998, and produced larger shares of some commodities. Furthermore, since small farms constitute 91 percent of all farms “they accounted for a large share of assets owned by farms (69 percent) including land (68 percent). As custodians and managers of the bulk of farm assets, small farms play a major role in natural resource and environmental policy.”

An examination of small farm incomes “suggests that lower debt burdens could increase the profitability of small farm operations.” Leased land and equipment could reduce the capital needs of a farm, for example. Also, “Financially successful small farms tend to be more diversified.”

Some other findings:

- Fifty-three percent of all U.S. farms sold less than \$10,000 worth of agricultural products in 1998
- U.S. farms tended to be specialized in production, rather than diversified, with over half of farms producing just one commodity, most often beef cattle or field crops
- Women operate a growing share of farms, most commonly small farms, rising from 5 percent of farmers in 1978 to 9 percent in 1997, though data collection procedures probably undercount women
- Large and very large family farms received a disproportionate share of government payments