


Introduction

“Belonging to a CSA allows me to support and invest in something in which I believe — something which is good for my senses and good for the earth. It is difficult to explain the satisfaction I get from knowing where my food comes from.”

—CSA member

Satisfaction. The word comes up again and again in discussions of Community Supported Agriculture. This chapter explains CSA and why participants find it appealing. It also starts farmers on the first steps to examining their current operations and making the change to CSA.

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What Is It?

This section covers the history of CSA and benefits of CSA projects.

CSA is a partnership between farmer and consumers.

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) is the name for a variety of partnerships between farmers and consumers. In CSA, consumers buy products directly from the farm, and pay for them in advance. Farmers do their best to produce sufficient quantities, quality of food and variety to meet consumers' needs.

The specific form that CSA takes depends on the community and the farm. The arrangement as it first appeared in the U.S. is the **shareholding, participatory CSA**. A group of people who want fresh produce from a known source organize, find land, hire a farmer or gardener, and plan out the crop mix, amount of produce, and cost per consumer. They then pre-pay either in full or in installments for their portions of the farm's production.

As each crop comes in, the harvest is divided into shares, which are typically large enough for two to five people. Members receive these shares once or twice a week. In addition to putting up money, members may also give time to the garden, four or eight or more hours over the season. In this arrangement, the farmer cuts down on time spent marketing and can concentrate on the actual farming. Consumers assure the farmer's salary and in return receive a regular supply of a variety of fresh vegetables and fruits, usually organically grown. In addition, the risk of a crop failure, which can be devastating to an individual farmer, is spread over the whole membership.

A distinct spinoff called **subscription farming** is common in California, and is usually **farmer-directed**. Here again, the consumers pre-pay, but involvement is reduced. An existing farm which may also sell wholesale or at farmers' markets makes weekly share deliveries whose value is basically pre-determined. That is, in the shareholding CSA the amount delivered depends on how much is ready to harvest, but in a subscription CSA the amount delivered has a market value equal to however much the share cost. Subscription arrangements are more flexible, because members pay by the quarter or month, or even by the week. Also, members are not expected to donate labor to the farm. Subscription farming, therefore, allows farms to diversify their marketing and to receive payment for some of their production ahead of time.

*American
CSAs began in
the Northeast
in the
mid-1980s*

CSAs trace their beginning to Japan in 1965. The Seikatsu Club Consumers Cooperative was founded in the Tokyo area by 200 women seeking a clean supply of milk. It has developed into a buying cooperative of 150,000 member-families, and has started other companies, begun recycling shops, and provided child-care services. It currently employs about 700 people. In the mid-1970s, the same type of producer-consumer associations came to Europe, where they are somewhat smaller.

Jan VanderTuin became involved with consumer-producer cooperatives in Switzerland in the early 1980s, then brought the idea of CSA to the U.S. With Robyn Van En, John Root, and Hugh Ratcliffe, he co-founded the first American CSA, in South Egremont, Massachusetts in 1985. In 1986, Trauger Groh helped start a second CSA. Since then, the number of CSAs in this country has grown to several hundred, operating mostly in the Northeast and in California, with others in the Midwest and the South. They range in size from 25 to more than 200 shares, and prices run from \$10 to \$35 per weekly delivery or \$300 to \$800 or more for a season's share. In addition to vegetables and milk, there are CSAs that sell eggs, fruit, meat, and other products.

Farmers often start CSA projects in response to a crisis: a bad year, the closing of a market, encroaching suburban development. Finding consumers to support the farm and become involved in its successes and failures helps small farms stay viable. This is especially true as more consumers become aware of how their food is produced, and as farmers receive smaller percentages of retail food dollars.

Farmers and consumers participate in CSA projects both for short- and long-term benefits. In addition, the larger community benefits from these locally-based initiatives.

Consumers benefit because:

- ✦ Their food is fresher than they could get from grocery stores
- ✦ They have more control over how their food is produced
- ✦ They regain a sense of being connected to the land and to other people

Farmers benefit because:

- ✦ They know how much and what to produce ahead of time
- ✦ The risk of crop loss or low commodity prices is reduced
- ✦ They can concentrate on land stewardship and long-term sustainability of their farm operations

Everyone benefits because:

- ✦ Money spent on food stays in the local economy
- ✦ Use of resources for transportation and packaging is greatly reduced
- ✦ CSA promotes cooperation based on personal relationships over competition for customers and prices
- ✦ Local markets for farm products contribute to sustainability of area farms

There are hundreds of CSA farms in the US and Canada, with similar projects in Europe and Japan. American CSAs provide thousands of people millions of dollars of fresh, high quality farm products every year.

This handbook can help farmers decide whether to sell their products through CSA, and will provide useful information for *Making the Connection!*

Is It For YOU?

This section discusses some things to consider before starting a CSA project.

CSA takes some planning, coordination, and management. It may fit well into your current operation, or you may be looking for a new direction. Here are some areas to consider before starting a CSA:

COMMITMENT

When you start a CSA, you are committing to supplying your members regularly for a season or a year. Since this is a major undertaking and responsibility, it will be important to have support from your family and/or partners. As in other enterprises and farming in general, making a CSA successful takes time and hard work. However, a CSA farmer can't just quit in the middle of the season.

MANAGEMENT

CSA requires more management and record-keeping than other marketing channels. You need to manage production more closely, especially for CSAs in which you provide food every week. You also need to track budgets and payments.

CONTACT

In CSA, you have more contact with your customers than with other marketing channels. Most farms have their members visit the farm at least once or twice a year, and sometimes every week. For some farmers, this relieves the isolation of farming, while for others it is an annoying disruption.

VARIETY

Especially if you are providing produce, you will need to grow a variety of products. The larger the portion of their food needs you can supply, the more members are committed to the CSA. You should know or learn about a number of crops, animals, and value-added products. You also need a willingness to experiment.

*CSA farmers
are happier
with their work.*

Rodale Institute
Study (1994)

This handbook and a wealth of other information from many sources can help you over any obstacle you run into. Your interest, commitment, and energy are vital to making your CSA successful. The good news is that farmers find CSA worth the effort, according to a Rodale Institute study. When asked to compare CSA to their previous marketing experience, surveyed farmers responded that the economic risk was lower, the time spent marketing was less, and the job satisfaction was greater. In addition, although incomes were still low, they were higher than before and expected to increase.

Getting Started

This section describes the two main approaches to CSA projects, and the steps to setting them up.

The first step to starting a CSA project is to find out if people are interested. Talk to people you know at civic groups, schools, churches or farmers' markets. Find out what they would buy through a CSA. Ask them to talk to family members and friends. This initial, informal survey puts the idea of a CSA out in the community, and lets you assess whether a CSA might work.

When you sense enough interest, you can plan your CSA more formally. The kind of CSA you envision affects the approach you take to planning. One approach is **participatory**. Members get involved early in making decisions about the project. They help write the budget, plan the crops and arrange distribution. Usually, a core group, rather than the whole membership, does this planning. A participatory approach really involves people in their food supply, because they help determine how their food is produced, what food will be produced, and learn how much it costs to produce. In some CSAs, members even help grow, harvest and distribute the food.

Another approach is **farmer-directed**, leaving planning to the farmer. CSA becomes more a method of recruiting loyal customers. Members do benefit from fresh products, and do learn about eating seasonally and the risks associated with farming. However, they are less involved with the process that brings them their food. With this approach, the farmer does much of the initial planning before looking for members.

The following are brief descriptions of the steps to creating your CSA. You will find explanations of each step in the rest of this handbook, in the chapters indicated. Both types of CSAs need to accomplish largely the same things, simply in different orders.

Two approaches to CSA:

Participatory
—lots of member involvement

Farmer-directed
—little member involvement

PARTICIPATORY CSA

STEPS TO FORMING ONE

Spread the Word (see *Members*)

- ✦ Word-of-mouth
- ✦ Presentations
- ✦ Flyers/brochures

Set Up a Meeting (see *Appendix*)

- ✦ Explain CSA
- ✦ Show your farm
- ✦ Discuss benefits of CSA
- ✦ Ask for participation

Form a Core Group (see below and *Members*)

- ✦ Made up of three to eight people
- ✦ Draws up budget
- ✦ Sets guidelines

Draw Up Proposal (see *Members*)

- ✦ Crop plan
- ✦ Budget
- ✦ Payment plan

Obtain Members (see *Members*)

- ✦ Write press release
- ✦ Distribute Proposal
- ✦ Get commitment for shares

Start Farming

*For a
participatory
CSA, planning
comes before
farming.*

CORE GROUP

The core group of three to eight members together with the farmer sets up the CSA. As the farmer, you can decide how much leeway the core group should have. For example, you may want to have total control over the farming, but work with them on distribution. Or, you may want the core group to decide on all aspects of the farming operation, while you act as a consultant on what to grow, when things are available, how much it will cost to farm for these shares, etc.

Members of the core group must be committed to the project. They will need to meet regularly and often (*some meet once a week, especially when putting the Proposal together*), handle problems as they come up, keep in contact with the members, and ensure that harvest and distribution go smoothly. They should divide up the tasks and responsibilities, and have specific people in charge of each.

More information about core groups and working with members is in the chapter *Members*.

I *You will
find more
information
about
MEETINGS with
members in the
appendix.*

FARMER-DIRECTED CSA

STEPS TO FORMING ONE

Make Crop Plan (see *Production for CSA*)

Draw Up Budget (see *Managing the Shares*)

- ✦ Figure your costs
- ✦ Establish a share price

Write Proposal (see *Members*)

- ✦ Who you are
- ✦ Harvest plan
- ✦ Delivery plan
- ✦ Commitment form

Recruit Members (see *Members*)

- ✦ Where to find them
- ✦ How to reach them
- ✦ Getting their commitment

A farmer-directed CSA can begin farming before recruiting members.

When trying to find out if people might join a marketing CSA, you don't have to work out the details in full. You can tell generally what you plan to produce, how often shares will be distributed, approximately how much participation you would expect from members.

However, when you actually start recruiting members and asking for commitments and money, you should already have decided all the details of what you will grow, how long the season will be, when and where share pick-ups will happen, how share payments will work, etc.

Remember, no matter how you organize your CSA, members and potential members will influence all the decisions about it. They may have direct control, or they may simply make suggestions. Either way, you should listen to them. One of the draws of CSA for consumers is having some say in how their food is produced.

Designing Your CSA

This section identifies issues you should consider when designing your CSA.

The core of CSA is that consumers pay up-front and the farmer produces specifically for the CSA members. Beyond that, each project creates its own particular arrangements.

This manual will discuss many of the decisions you will need to make about your CSA. To get you thinking, the next few pages will outline some questions to keep in mind when setting up your CSA. They will also guide you to sections of this manual where you can find more information.

ISSUES TO CONSIDER

HOW MUCH CONTROL WILL YOU/DO YOU WANT OVER THE PROJECT?

You can run the CSA as another aspect of your farm operation, and handle it just as you would handle any other marketing outlet. On the other hand, you can encourage members to take some part in running the CSA. They can help with planning, distribution, or even harvesting. How much they do depends in part on their interest, but also on how much you would like them to do (*see Getting Started in this chapter*).

WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO OFFER THROUGH YOUR CSA?

Most projects mainly distribute fruits and vegetables. Some also offer eggs and milk, and few even have meat. In addition, you can consider non-edibles, such as flowers, and value-added products, such as dried fruit, jams, garlic braids, etc. (*see Production for CSA*).

HOW BIG WILL YOUR PROJECT BE?

A **share** is the part of the harvest that each member receives. You need to consider how many shares you will offer, and how much each will contain. Typically, a share is

enough for two to five people, depending on the product and the members (*see Production for CSA*).

WHO WILL YOUR MEMBERS BE?

Your members don't come to you by chance. Whether you realize it or not, you will be looking for certain kinds of people. Determine whom you are trying to attract, and then you can tailor your CSA and your outreach to those people (*see Members*).

FOR HOW MANY WEEKS WILL MEMBERS RECEIVE SHARES?

Some CSAs strive to provide produce year-round, either fresh or from storage. Others only run for part of the year, delivering produce for 30 or 40 weeks (*see Production for CSA*).

HOW MUCH WILL SHARES COST?

You'll have to take into account how much you are offering members, what you expect of them, how they will pay for shares, and what your needs and costs are to determine a fair share price (*see Managing the Shares*).

WILL MEMBERS BE INVOLVED IN HARVESTING THE CROPS?

Many CSAs have members doing fieldwork, especially for certain crops like beans, pumpkins and berries (*see Production for CSA*).

HOW WILL YOUR CSA HANDLE DISTRIBUTION?

There are many things to decide about distribution: who does it — the farmer, the members, or someone hired for the purpose; will shares be packaged or distributed bulk for members to divide up; will the delivery site be tended like a farmstand or untended (*see Managing the Shares*).

Each of these questions is explored in greater detail in later chapters.

These issues have all been described as separate items, but they are in fact related. As you design your CSA, first mentally and then more concretely, how you decide each one of these issues will affect other ones. You need to keep the whole CSA in mind, from members to payment to planting to harvest, as you put the pieces together.

It may help to look at the whole operation of two example farms — the Vegetable Club CSA in Colfax and Full Belly Farm in Guinda.

VEGETABLE CLUB (COLFAX)

Dan and Jennifer Crebbin farm using bio-dynamic techniques. When they started their CSA a few years ago, they connected with the local Waldorf school because it, like bio-dynamics, is based on the ideas of Rudolf Steiner, a German philosopher and founder of Anthroposophy. Their members have come from this ready-made connection, or through word-of-mouth.

Their CSA is **shareholding** and **farmer-directed**. Members pay for the whole season, which runs from April or May through Thanksgiving. They can pay for their shares all at once in advance, or several times over the course of the year. As long as they receive sufficient start-up money, the Crebbins work with members to create convenient payment plans. There is no core group or mandatory workdays. However, members are often at the farm because that is where they pick up their shares.

Shareholders are divided into two groups with different weekly pick-up days. Twice a week, the Crebbins fill baskets in a small shed near the road with the ready harvest. They post a sign telling members what they can take from each basket: a pound of this, a handful of that, two heads of something else. Members are encouraged to bring their own bags. Because the shed is close to the house and off the main road, it does not need to be tended. Consequently, pick-up times are long, from noon to 7:00 p.m.

They get about 35 shares off the two to three acres in vegetable production, which gives them enough income but isn't enough to require extra help. They also take a few members through the winter, supplying them with crops "stored" in the field. These shares are sold week-to-week.

Members pick up shares at the farm. Half come early in the week, the other half a few days later.

FULL BELLY FARM (GUINDA)

Full Belly Farm has a larger operation, and their CSAs are only one market outlet. In addition, they sell to retailers and wholesalers. They have CSA members in several cities: Sacramento, Berkeley, San Francisco and Palo Alto, to which they deliver on different days of the week. All told, there are hundreds of members.

These are **subscription** CSAs. However, the Berkeley one was started mainly by one of Full Belly's loyal customers, whereas the others have been **farmer-directed**. In Berkeley, one member wanted to see a CSA servicing her city, so she asked Full Belly to participate, recruited members and keeps the CSA records herself. In Palo Alto, the farmers' market closes for the winter, so the farm has a winter CSA to provide their customers there with fresh, organic vegetables until the market re-opens. In that case, recruiting happened mainly through their regular customers at the market. In Sacramento, the farm connected with a staff person at the *Sacramento Bee*, the daily newspaper, which gave them a large pool of potential members and a drop-off point.

Full Belly publicizes the CSAs by word-of-mouth and with Proposal brochures. They have also been profiled in several newspaper articles.

All shares are packaged at the farm, and then dropped off at several sites in town. They ask members to return the waxed produce boxes the following week for re-use. Usually, these sites are untended, and are a church, front porches, driveways, etc. Shares cost \$11 per week, paid four weeks at a time. The weekly share is packed so that it has a value of about \$11 dollars at current farmers' market prices. The farm sometimes uses nuts or dried tomatoes or onions to bring the box up to the full value. They also occasionally include fruit which they buy from neighboring organic farms.

While working is not mandatory, volunteer workdays bring members to the farm and teach them about farming. Each fall the farm also hosts a harvest celebration.

Worksheet

Designing Your CSA

It may help you to write down your thoughts on these issues. This worksheet can help you start planning your CSA. These topics are handled in greater detail in later chapters, so you don't need to have final answers here.

1. How much control will you/do you want over the project?

2. What are you going to offer through your CSA?

_____ Vegetables

_____ Fruit

_____ Nuts

_____ Milk

_____ Eggs

_____ Meat

_____ Flowers

_____ Other _____

3. How big will your project be?

4. Who will your members be?

5. For how many weeks will members receive shares?



