



Bill Wright

This mutually supportive relationship between local farmers and community members helps to create economically stable farm operations.

What is Community Supported Agriculture?

About 35 years ago, a new model of local agriculture was developed. The movement was started in Japan by a group of women who were concerned about the increase in food imports and the loss of local farms. These women set out to establish a growing and purchasing relationship with local farmers. This arrangement, called “teikei” in Japanese, translates to “putting the farmer’s face on food.” The concept later reached Europe and then the United States where it became known as **community supported agriculture**, or **CSA**.

Community supported agriculture (CSA) refers to a partnership between a farmer and a community of supporters. At the beginning of the year, supporters purchase a “share” of the farm’s production. The farmer uses this money to cover the cost of seeds, fertilizer, equipment maintenance, and labor, and produces a healthy supply of fresh produce throughout the season (usually May through October in Wisconsin).

When CSA members make this commitment, they are supporting the farm through the season and are sharing the costs, risks and bounty of growing food along with the farmer. This mutually supportive relationship between local farmers and community members helps to create economically stable farm operations in which members are assured the highest quality produce. In return, farmers are assured a reliable market for a variety of crops.

How does a CSA work?

When community members purchase a “share,” they receive a bag or box of locally grown, fresh produce once a week during the growing season. The type of produce received varies from farm to farm and, in some cases, may also include such things as honey, eggs or herbs. The method of distribution also varies from farm to farm. Some farms deliver all boxes to a central location for pick-up by members while others require members to pick up their boxes at the farm on a designated day and time. It is important to understand the operating procedures of the CSA share purchased to get the most benefit from it.

In addition to healthy produce, CSA farms also provide a focal point for education and community building. CSA farms sponsor a variety of events throughout the year, which can include field days, workdays, harvest festivals and celebrations. These events provide an opportunity for families to share and learn together in a rural setting.

Why are CSAs important?

Through direct marketing, CSAs give farmers the fairest return on their products.

A CSA helps to create dialog between farmers and consumers and increases understanding of how, where and by whom food is grown.

A CSA creates a sense of social responsibility and stewardship of local land.

By purchasing shares in a CSA, members keep food dollars in the local community and maintain local food production.

The CSA farm model provides an excellent means for growers to market their produce. However, there are several factors to consider before you establish a CSA on your farm.

Personality

The heart of a CSA program is the sense of community that the farmer establishes with the subscriber. For subscribers to gain this sense of community, they need to know about you, your family, your farm and how you manage it. They also want to see the farm and feel that they are a part of what you are doing. Some growers excel in this type of environment while others may be more private. You must examine yourself to determine if this type of environment is a good fit for you.

Insurance

How will a CSA affect your operation from an insurance standpoint? Not only are there product liability issues to consider, but a CSA may create new insurance issues. Ask yourself: Will subscribers be coming to the farm to pick up their shares? Will the farm be hosting member events such as hayrides, potluck picnics, or pumpkin-picking festivals? The answers will help to understand the potential risks and liabilities involved.

If customers come to your premises and happen to get involved in an accident, there is a potential for liability. The circumstances will vary from farm to farm and as such it is best to discuss your needs with an insurance professional before starting a CSA to determine both the cost and availability of any coverage you may need.

Marketing

Another area to consider is how you will make potential customers aware that you are offering shares in a CSA. In some areas you may first need to educate customers about CSAs, so a brochure or handout may be necessary. (Note: You could incorporate the first few paragraphs of this article into your brochure to explain how a CSA works.) If you are currently selling at a farmers market, this is an excellent place to start recruiting members for the following year. You may also want to consider listing your CSA on one of the following web sites:

www.savorwisconsin.com
www.biodynamics.com/usda/csastate.htm
www.sare.org/csa/
www.foodroutes.org
www.localharvest.org
www.macsac.org
 (southern Wisconsin only)

Computer

While a computer is not absolutely necessary, it can make a CSA a lot easier to manage. You can use it to establish a database to track members, create mailing labels or help with bookkeeping duties. It can also be used to create weekly newsletters that you can distribute along with subscribers' boxes of produce.

Vegetable varieties

Some fresh market growers like to limit production to the crops that grow best for them. However, the CSA grower must focus on a wide range of vegetables so that subscribers receive an interesting variety of vegetables throughout the season. Depending on the length of the subscription period, this may include everything from asparagus and rhubarb in the early spring to parsnips and kale in the late fall.

This system calls for a high degree of planning on the grower's part to determine space available, crop rotations, timing of plantings, etc. Each week members like to feel that they are "getting their money's worth" and planning must take into account the need for creating a variety box that keeps subscribers happy with the value and variety of each delivery. Although mustard greens or bok choy are nice box fillers early in the season, most households won't want to receive these items several weeks in a row.

Another consideration for the boxes would be to collaborate with other local farmers who have products available that you don't. Offering eggs, meat products, flowers, herbs and other items can be another way to provide your members with a diversity of products and support other local farmers.

Labor

Whenever a business operation expands or changes direction, the availability of labor must be considered. Will labor (either family members or hired help) be available when it is needed? This includes not only the normal work of planting, weeding, and related tasks but also the added time and labor necessary to pack and deliver the weekly boxes.

Many CSAs hire summer interns to help with the labor. This is a win-win situation for farmers and interns as most interns are looking to get into farming and want hands-on experience. There are formalized programs that connect farmers with interns, as well as farmers who advertise on their own for additional summer help by offering intern experiences.

Another method for managing labor on the farm is to offer a reduced price of the share for the exchange for subscriber labor. This gives the subscriber an opportunity to experience the farm first-hand and provides the farmer with additional labor.

Cold storage

Cold storage can be expensive to install and represents an on-going cost for operation and repair. However, as the business expands it will be a critical component of the CSA operation. It is best to talk to other growers about what systems they use and the reliability of the system. A poorly designed or antiquated system can become a serious drain on the farm's resources.

Washing and packing

As a CSA operation expands from a few members to several hundred, washing vegetables and weekly packing of boxes becomes a larger task. At some point, you'll need to build a packing shed to accomplish this more efficiently.

When building the packing shed, consider access to water, disposal of water, storage for boxes, lighting, washing equipment, cold storage, loading facilities and ergonomic considerations for packers. Again, the experience of other growers may save you a lot of wasted time and expense.

Subscriber pickup vs. off-site delivery

The place where members receive their weekly share will vary from farm to farm and depend upon a number of variables. Things to consider are:

The location of the farm in relation to members. Are subscribers willing to drive to your farm for pickup?

Is a suitable off-farm site available (easy access, secure, suitable temperature, etc.)

Does the farm have access to a truck large enough to transport the boxes?

A remote site may often be a member's porch or garage, a community center, food co-op or church. A site manager is needed to oversee pickup and clean-up. Many CSAs trade a share to someone willing to take on oversight responsibilities.

Newsletter

A weekly newsletter is an extremely important tool in the operation of a successful CSA and will help to accomplish several things. It keeps subscribers connected to the farm by keeping them informed of what is taking place (for example, changes at the farm or the effect of recent weather on a particular crop.) The newsletter can also be a tool to educate subscribers about how to properly handle and store their produce as well as include recipes for vegetables with which they may be unfamiliar.

To save time during the busy growing season, some growers prepare parts of their newsletter (recipes, storage and handling tips, etc.) during the winter and store the files on their computer. This way the bulk of the work is done in advance and the grower only needs to write a small portion each week updating subscribers to news on the farm.

On-farm activities

Inviting subscribers to the farm is another way to help members "connect" with your operation. The type of activity offered (hayride, pick-your-own pumpkin, potluck picnic, etc.) will determine the logistics which must be taken into consideration. A few of these will include parking, rescheduling in case of bad weather, and any additional help needed.

Conclusion

A number of factors for you to consider before starting a CSA have been covered here. Remember, a CSA is more than a new way to market vegetables. Sharing the risks of agriculture is not only a way to increase farmers' financial standing, but also a recognition that food and farms are vital to our existence.



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