

Growing a CSA from scratch: creating community and improving your farm's bottom line.

Oakley, E. and M. Appel. 2006. Growing a CSA from scratch: creating community and improving your farm's bottom line. Acres. Vol. 36, No 4.

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) programs enable many small-scale growers throughout the country to maintain economic viability, develop strong relationships with their customers, and provide an alternative marketing outlet to corporate food systems. CSA farmers commit to producing food, and community members pledge to buy it, throughout a growing season. Each party shares in the risks and rewards of farming. Members pay an up-front fee to supply the farmer with much-needed capital at the beginning of the season, guaranteeing an outlet for his or her products. In exchange, members get fresh, local produce picked just for them, and an intimate connection to the people growing their food. This article explores the steps necessary to start a CSA program on your farm.

Why Start a CSA?

The greatest benefit to CSA farmers is capital received at a time of year when expenses are high and cash-flow is low. This upfront money makes it possible to avoid borrowing for seasonal start-up costs, such as seeds and compost. CSAs are a consistent income that takes some of the gambling out of farming. When farmers' markets are rainy and sales are slow, a CSA can help stabilize your monthly earnings. In addition, by selling directly to the consumer farmers' gain a price advantage over wholesale. CSAs are also a great avenue for distributing bountiful harvests.

A CSA is not only good for you; it is also good for customers. Besides forming a connection with the farm, they experience the joys of eating fresh, healthy food. Along with the produce, most CSAs give members a newsletter containing recipes, photos, and stories from the field. For many customers, a CSA is a convenient way to get produce and encourages them to try new foods. Each week brings new food surprises, creating awareness about eating with the seasons.

The Mechanics of Getting Started

Growing for a CSA

The most important aspect of CSA success is a knowledgeable and experienced farmer. A CSA requires the ability to plan and project estimated harvest yields. You need an accurate idea of how much of each item must be grown, when you can expect to begin harvesting, and for how long it will produce.

CSAs generally deliver produce on a weekly basis. First, you must define the length of your season. We suggest giving yourself enough flex room on either end of the season so that your fields are well into production by the

time the CSA starts and harvests are still abundant by the time it ends. Next, you must determine how much food you aim to deliver each week based on the length of the CSA season and the number of customers. This will help you decide how much of each item you should grow and when. Succession planting helps maintain a prolonged harvest of staple crops.

Diversity is essential! Few people want to eat cabbage for ten weeks in a row, so growing a wide variety of crops is important in retaining customers from one year to the next. Plan to grow spring, summer, and fall crops. Stretching the seasons can be a good way of maximizing selections. Always give yourself plenty of wiggle room in the numbers and types of crops you have growing at any given time so that you have enough "inventory" to work with in determining weekly offerings. This will help avoid repetition and keep customer's interest.

Where to Find Customers

A great place to start looking for customers is with a previously established consumer base, such as farmers' market clients. These people already know what you grow, how your operation works, and what to expect. A CSA can make a good customer even better by giving them the chance to make a bigger, more regular commitment, helping you generate new revenue.

Drawing in new customers is best done through big venues, particularly those whose members are likely to be interested in your product. Local civic groups, churches, and businesses can be good places to reach out to large numbers of people at one time. Host informal meetings to discuss your CSA, answer questions, and sign up members. Passing out an informational brochure gives potential members a quick run-down of what the CSA program has to offer and how they can join.

Advertising Your Product

The key to attracting customers is educating them about the benefits of what you are selling. In this case, it is both a tangible product and an idea. Most people who join CSAs care about *how* their food is being grown and *by whom*. Customers generally want fresh, high quality, and organic or sustainably produced food from someone they know and trust. These are the three things they cannot buy at the grocery store. Do not be shy about highlighting those unique benefits when promoting your CSA program.

Determining Basket Contents

Keep track of what is put in each basket from week to week with a spreadsheet system. This will allow you to both review and project basket contents. When deciding what to put in the baskets, find a balance between delivering enough produce for the share price, but not so much as to overwhelm customers with more food than they can use in a week. Remember, this is their primary or sole source of vegetables each week, so plan basket contents by intentionally thinking through how they can use it each item. Aim for seven to nine items per week for a family of two.

A typical basket might include:

<i>Spring...</i>	<i>Summer...</i>
* bunch of beets	* 1# tomatoes
* bunch of greens	* bunch of basil
* bunch of carrots	* 1/2# sweet peppers
* 1# broccoli	* 1 melon
* 1# cabbage	* 1# summer squash
* bunch of parsley	* 1# green beans
* head of lettuce	* 1# eggplant
* 1# new potatoes	* 1 slicing cucumber

Delivering the Weekly Basket

CSAs often encourage members to pick up their produce at the farm in order to help community members gain a closer understanding of how the farm functions. However, most farms are not within quick driving distance of urban centers. In these instances, it makes more sense for the farmer to deliver the produce to several centralized locations in town for customer pick up.

Produce can be delivered in grocery bags, boxes, or baskets. In choosing a method, think about protecting the produce during packaging and transportation. Once arranged into individual containers, it helps to display each item in an attractive manner. If you use something permanent such as baskets, be sure to have two for each member so that one can be taken home and one can be packed into for the next week.

Creating a flexible pick up schedule is an important part of meeting customers' needs. Offer at least two different days of the week, and two or three pick up locations. In arranging locations, be attentive to plentiful parking, easy access, and familiarity. But also keep your needs in mind. Do not overextend yourself by providing more flexibility than is necessary. A successful routine for our farm has been coordinating the CSA pick up with our two weekly farmers' markets. One is on a Wednesday afternoon while the other is on a Saturday morning. This gives people a range of options and also helps keep our trips to town to a minimum. We package everything for the CSA at the farm, and then transport the CSA items in separate containers to the market. We assemble the CSA baskets while setting up our market display.

Packing and Post-Harvest Handling

It goes without saying that you must always provide healthy, fresh, and clean produce. Unlike farmers' market customers, CSA members do not get to select their own produce. They are relying on you to give them the

highest quality possible. We like to grade for the CSA first. Keep produce cool in a cooler until just before delivery. Wrap perishable items in plastic bags to preserve freshness, and protect fragile vegetables and fruits in paper bags. Customers do not always know which items should be refrigerated, left on the counter, or need to be put into bags so giving them tips about storage helps them preserve freshness.

Pricing

Originally, CSAs were priced by dividing up the entire farm's expenses by the number of customers the farm could support to arrive at a distribution of the costs. This works only when the farm sells exclusively through the CSA. Now, most CSAs project a figure based on the amount of produce they anticipate delivering over the course of the season to each member. Pricing is generally based on local farmers' market prices, while giving some discount as thanks for the commitment to your farm. We like to give a 10% bonus over the course of the season. In a sense, the discount reflects "interest" on their initial investment.

One way of creating an annual membership price is to decide upon an amount of produce you would like to deliver each week multiplied by the number of weeks of delivery. For example, on our farm, the share fee is based on a weekly basket of produce worth \$15.00. The \$15.00 dollars is multiplied by 20 weeks of delivery for an annual share price of \$300.

Payment

Typically, CSA members make an annual payment at the beginning of the season. Some CSAs allow for quarterly or monthly payments. Although this may seem like a good way of being sensitive towards tight finances, you can end up with customers who pay late or cancel their membership mid-season. Limit the number of installment payments you allow so as to ensure you have enough winter income. You can also invite more fortunate customers to contribute towards a financial aid account. Many CSAs offer "work-shares" in which members trade labor for some or all of the cost of a share.

Make the up front payment easier on customers by sending them reminders in early winter so that they can begin saving for the share price. This does double-duty as a method of keeping in touch with them over the long off-season.

Communicating With Customers

Newsletters keep customers informed about what is going on at the farm. They are also ideal for educating them about the trials and joys of farming, the significance of supporting local agriculture, and what it means to be environmentally, economically, and socially sustainable. Newsletters should also include recipes that call for the items in their basket. Recipes are particularly useful for unique crops that people might not be familiar with. They also inspire new uses for old stand-bys. Photos are a wonderful means of sharing the weekly activities of farm life.

Surveys of customer likes and dislikes are indispensable for refining your program. Ask questions about variety preferences, pick-up schedules, pricing, produce quality, and ways of improving the program. Offer farm tours so members can see you and their food in action. Finally, provide customers with a member handbook to answer frequently asked questions. Content can include: a definition of CSAs, customer and farmer benefits,

pick-up instructions, tips for using veggies, what to do when a customer goes is on vacation, and a sample harvest calendar.

Beginning Your First Season

Keep the membership size to a manageable number the first year. Think about the number of acres available, labor (especially on harvest days), and how much diversity you can comfortably predict. Will you have new operating costs? How much income do you anticipate generating? Will you earn enough revenue to justify the effort? Do you have the right equipment? Be certain to have these questions answered as you want to ensure a personally and financially rewarding experience and avoid burn-out.

Take time to meet with local CSA farmers, interview them about their methods, and visit them on a CSA delivery day if you can. Seeing another CSA in action will help you in designing your own system.

CSAs offer the chance to secure income, connect with customers, serve as an educator and leader, and share the passion of farming. They tap into the increasing consumer demand for real food experiences, and are a great way to expand a business.