

STARTING A CSA...

If you want to engage in CSA, you must

- Genuinely enjoy people and have patience for them
- Be an experienced grower of a wide variety of crops. CSA is NOT for folks in their first or second season of growing. *Many a well-meaning newcomer has done much damage to the reputation of CSAs in general.*
- Have experience with crop planning and the full farming year
- Have at least one experienced mentor whom you can call upon with questions/problems
- Be prepared to spend ample time on logistics as well as field work
- Be well organized
- Consider your long term goals and situation. You should have every intention of staying with your business for many years and being a treasured part of the community.
- Expect the unexpected

YOUR PERSONAL MISSION AND SUSTAINABILITY

Why do you want to do CSA? Take time to consider if this marketing method is best for you, your farm and your community. Advantages can include customers coming to you, a guaranteed market, great relationships, and truly connecting folks with their food. Drawbacks include the need for a strong variety of crops every week, people and their issues, and complex logistics.

Is this just a business for you or do you have a broader mission (education, community-building, social services?) CSA is inherently educational to its participants. Consider if you are interested in field trips, day camps, apprenticeships, special events, agri-tourism, etc. You will be contacted by folks seeking this sort of thing, so have your response ready, and consider your long-term hopes. Remember to always consider the sustainability of your farming business and your own enjoyment. And to balance what you would *like* to do with the reality of how much time and labor you have available.

Will the CSA be your whole business or part of a larger, diverse operation?

BUSINESS PARTNERSHIPS

If you are starting this business with a friend, significant other or spouse, or group of people...be ready for some turbulence. Most marriages survive farming together, but not all do! Same with friends or business partners. **Be very clear with each other about expectations.** Though you may have equal ability in all areas, most partners find it very advantageous to **carve out agreed areas of responsibility and establish a process for resolving conflicts before they occur.** When agreed areas of responsibility are established, all partners can be still consulted and concerned in all areas of the business; but each has his/her own specialty and areas of expertise.

SUPPORT

- A trusted mentor who is experienced, and happy to help.
- Core group? Read about it in Elizabeth Henderson's *Sharing the Harvest*. Ask around. Consider who would be in the group, if they would understand and could give the support you need. Define the jobs you would like non-farmers to do. Think about how often you would meet, for how long. Core groups can be wonderful or frustrating. Clearly dividing responsibilities is critical: the farmers run the farm and the core group helps run the CSA (distribution, crop choice, share pricing, outreach, communications)
- Connect with other growers.
- Informal support: farming mentors, shareholders whose opinions you value, loved ones who will always be there to help.

PEOPLE ISSUES

- People who join CSAs are passionate about their food, and want to know their farmer. Be ready to hear about their kids and spouses and meals and memories, and know their names.
- POLICIES—be EXTREMELY clear in your literature and all correspondence. Clearly indicate policies for
 - late pick-up
 - pick-up by someone else
 - switching pick-up days
 - sharing shares
 - payment (Lump sum? Schedule? Fee for late payment? Sliding scale? Working shares?)
 - children (theirs and yours)
 - pets (theirs and yours)
 - shareholders in the fields...pick your own or not, kids again...
 - liability

Think hard about these policies and talk to other CSA growers before you decide what to do. Try to keep it simple.

COMMUNICATION

- Communicate your policies clearly in as many ways and as often as possible. And be aware that most people still won't get it.
- Brochure—even if you do a lot online, it's nice for folks to have a paper reference they can keep on their bulletin board
- Website
- Blog
- Newsletter? Email or print?
Blogs or newsletters are BELOVED by members. Make sure it's not a time/energy sucker for you!
Recipes, fun food facts, preservation tips, relevant news, events, quotes, poetry, etc
- PAYMENT COMMUNICATION is extremely important and very appreciated. Contact folks to let them know you got their payment, and/or if they are late in payment.

MARKETING

- Brochures: Try to anticipate all the Frequently Answered Questions so you can give them the brochure and save time. Distribute brochures at health food stores, anyplace with kids, yoga/exercise places, colleges with sustainable or green clubs, hip cafes that serve local fare, ethnic groceries, movie theatres.
- Free press – interviews of you in the local newspaper, radio, TV programs
- Your own website and the website of farm-friendly organizations
- Contact already existing groups— churches, clubs, libraries, schools. Give presentations about your CSA and about organic farming and its benefits.
- PUBLICITY!!!
- Find markets for crop excesses—restaurants, a friend who sells at market, stores...
- Find a place to donate some crop excesses

ORGANIZATION

- Payment system and communication
- Membership database and profile—name/add/phone/email/shared share?/returning member?/payment plan and payments received/etc
- Excel? MS Access? Ledger book?
- Way to keep track of pick-up changes if you're accommodating folks' schedule changes
- Yearly Record keeping:
 - what you did and didn't follow according to the crop plan
 - crop and variety successes and failures
 - weather/pest/disease notes
 - each week's distribution
 - miscellaneous notes

-expenses and revenues

WHAT/HOW TO SELL

- Full shares? Half shares? Shared shares? Partial-season shares? Winter shares?
Half shares cost half the money of a full share for nearly as much work. Many CSAs charge *more* than half a full-share price. If you encourage people to share shares—this must be done with lots of clear communication.
- Share price: calculate your full costs of producing the food, including fair wages for the farmers and farm workers and set your price so that you cover your full budget. See what other growers are charging. Consider your population: if you want to include lower income members, consider a sliding scale for payments. Remember that what sounds like a hefty sum to a customer can be manageable with a payment plan. Check out prices at local farm stands and natural food stores. Try not to undercut yourself or other local farmers. You can sell some crops to other markets, or sell extra crops to your members for canning or freezing for an additional payment.
- Other items? You can collaborate with other farmers to sell local products like meat, eggs, flour, soaps...items can be offered in a retail fashion or as a share option.

DISTRIBUTING THE SHARES

- If customers pick up at the farm, will you be there or will you ask members to staff distribution?
Drop off points: will you deliver or ask members to do this? Where—can you find a place that is cool or has refrigeration?
- Will you prepacked: consider containers...bring your own bags? Take and return? Disposable?
- Pack your own: CLEAR signage. More than one scale for weighing? Consider share sharers. Put out extra.
- Pick up area
 - cool/shady/refrigerated
 - friendly
 - sign with this weeks' crop list. Pictures or examples are ideal.
 - SIGNAGE: parking, where to start, etc
 - sign-in sheet (consider shared shares, friends picking up, etc)
 - room for folks to split a share, cut a melon, whatever
 - supplies: bags, boxes, rubber bands, twist ties, pint boxes, knives, baskets, buckets, scissors for PYO
 - flowers, scrap paper and pens, etc
 - swap table/basket?
 - something to occupy the children?
 - community board? Recipe swap?
- Offer other items? Other growers' products, natural cleaning products, locally milled flour, a beekeeper's honey...

LAND

- If you own it, consider and work towards long-term health on your land, with neighbors, and in your community.
- Seeking land: contact land trusts, ask around, knock on doors...
There is a lot of great farmland out there that is not being used, including lawns, church grounds, corporate parks, etc. If you see good land, ask around or just go introduce yourself. Then get to work:
- ...when you find it, **THOUGHTFULLY CONSIDER**
 - formal lease
 - informal exchange of goods/services
 - quality of soil*
 - water availability
 - drainage

- storage space
- traffic issues
- history of the land
- neighbors, their (potential) issues

ANTICIPATE and write out policies for as many issues as you can think of. Water. Outbuildings. Equipment. Visitors. Sightliness. Emotional attachments and personalities. Profit sharing? Investments in the land (infrastructure, perennials...). The future—how much notice in case of situation changes.

**don't even consider farming somewhere without a soil test.*

GROWING

- Realize that you will need to have a variety of crops for each share every week throughout the season. Create a crop plan with succession plantings and seedings.
MINIMIZE RISK by using many crop varieties, multiple plantings, transplants and direct seeding.
DIVERSITY IS NATURE'S INSURANCE.
- Follow sound farming practices: soil building, pest control, season extension.
- Try hard to anticipate pest, disease, and weather challenges, and plan for the worst.

LABOR

- Can you afford to hire workers?
- How much do you want to work?
- Working shareholders:
You will need to supervise volunteer helpers carefully. Know that a lot more people will say they want to do this than will actually come through!
*Required or not?
*Schedule—regular is better than planning each time.
*Bring kids? (Will they work or play? Supervision? Parent's day?)
*pets?
*minimum work time – 3-4 hours at a stretch
- Groups—schools, Master gardeners, scouts, campers, community service, prisoners, etc. Once you're established: WOOF
- Internships: what can you offer? (Housing, stipend, food, education--*a must for an internship!*)
- Consider kinds of help you need: field work, distribution help, marketing, recordkeeping, mechanical, deliveries, newsletter...hire, or offer discount/share for help?

EQUIPMENT

- What do you need? Do you need a tractor or two, or can you get by with a rototiller and lots of hands? Horses? Oxen? Talk to farmers growing at the scale you intend to start at, *and* hope to achieve. Consider short and long term. Consider how much labor you *know* you'll have (not just what you're hoping for).
- Remember to factor equipment, and more-than-you'd-anticipate money for mechanical issues and repairs into your budget, not to mention all the little expenses you forgot about.
- Don't forget other things that add up fast: seed trays, seeds, potting soil, hand tools, fencing and row covers

CROP MANAGEMENT

- Wash station
- Containers for harvest and distribution
- Storage for harvested crops
- Storage for prepared shares
- Marketing plan for extra crops
- Donation plan for extra crops
- Worst-case scenario for crop failures (are there other growers whom you can barter with or buy from if need be?)

INSURANCE: You'll probably want/need general liability insurance.

EVALUATION

- Questionnaire for members? Make sure there is a way they can turn it in anonymously, though many may choose to email. Think about what you want to know and ask those questions. Leave lots of room for comment. And be tough when they come in
- And/or request input informally
- Compare each year's records: week-by-week distributions, crop successes and failures, variety successes and failures, greenhouse joys and sorrows...

RECOMMENDED READING/RESOURCES

- *Sharing the Harvest* by Elizabeth Henderson.

Adapted from a plan by Carolyn Llewellyn
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