

Community Supported Agriculture

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What is Community Supported Agriculture (CSA)?

According to the USDA a CSA consists of a community of individuals who pledge support to a farm operation so that the farmland becomes, either legally or spiritually, the community's farm, with the growers and consumers providing mutual support and sharing the risks and benefits of food production.

A Little History

The CSA movement began in Japan and Europe. CSA's were introduced in the United States in the year 1986. To today's date, there are approximately 1000 CSA's in the United States.

Why do Consumers Join CSA's?

Consumers join CSAs to support local farmers, have an access to fresh, high quality produce, access to organic or pesticide-free produce, it is more economical than the supermarket, to increase participation in community and environmental awareness.

How to Operate a Successful CSA - What skills do I need?

In order to operate a successful CSA, you must have a bit of farming knowledge. Organizational skills are a must as well as marketing skills. Business Management skills will also aid in a successful CSA. Farming skills include knowledge of growing cycles, crop sequences and sources for unique or unusual crops. You must also be able to plan for failures. Organizational skills include dependability, the ability to coordinate work for core group and volunteer members, the ability to develop a farm plan and budget and the ability to organize membership and delivery. Developing a farm plan and budget involves developing a bookkeeping system that records farm expenses, expense projections and income projections. It also involved and IRS Schedule F - Profit and Loss from Farming. Organizing Membership involves putting together contact information for each member, development of the types of membership, a payment schedule and planning a pick-up site and day. Marketing skills include good people skills, creativity, and knowledge of how to attract membership, knowledge of sharing pricing and a distribution that works. Business management skills involve determining the level of liability and appropriate insurance, developing farm policies and creating a legal structure for the organization.

Core Group

The grower-member council that works together to run the CSA is called the core group. They are responsible for determining the duties, activities, and function of the group.

Core Group Activities for Plowshares CSA

Monthly meetings during which members receive farm status updates, a treasurer's report and review newsletter articles. Members publish newsletter and brochure, organize special events and programs and manage membership.

Organizing a Core Group

There are different roles in the core group. The Membership Coordinator ensures contact between farmer and members, collects all correspondence and fees and deals with membership concerns and problems. The Treasurer receives fees from membership coordinator and keeps schedule of payment, deposits fees, writes checks to farmer and does bookkeeping and maintains bank account. Core group jobs include communication coordinator, volunteer coordinator, social director and needy family coordinator. The communication coordinator writes newsletters, copies and distributes newsletters and notices and maintains membership list and addresses. The volunteer coordinator helps coordinate volunteer days, maintains a list of volunteers and calls volunteers for market assistance. The job of the social director involves organizing social activities, coordinating volunteers for activities and working with farmer for on-farm events. The needy family coordinator identifies families for free shares, contact to families for farmer and insures that food gets to families.

Calculating the Cost of a Share

The cost of a share is calculated based on many factors. These factors include value based on farm budget, retail market, average weight of produce, unit pricing and the sliding scale options for low income families.

What Should CSAs Offer?

CSAs should offer education of consumers of seasonal variations in Florida (i.e., winter squash in April), focus on common vegetables, good variety and fresh, high quality.

Surveying Members

Surveying members include a rating system in the brochure, communicate, listen and observe. Many CSAs survey during season as well as at the end of the season.

To Supplement or Not?

The benefits of supplementing include an increased diversity of offerings, reduced risk and one stop shopping convenience. Drawbacks include extra labor, extra bookkeeping and increased costs. Some considerations for supplementing product include adjustment of share prices, partnership with local farmers, maintaining philosophy of CSA, delivery schedules and storage considerations and liability. Ways for increasing diversity without supplementing include distribution at local cooperatives and distribution at farmers markets.

Developing an Accounting System

In order to develop an accounting system, you must determine expenses, ensure record keeping of shares and shareholders, prorate costs of shares mid-season, distribute money to the farmer and reimburse shareholders for their expenses.

Distribution System

Components of a distribution system include determining hours and day(s) of pick-ups and establishing the best pick-up sites. Pick-up sites include on the farm, farmers market, central sites such as cooperatives, health stores and members homes, home delivery and mail delivery.

Developing Your Brochure

When developing your brochure, you must consider the basics such as CSA philosophy, What is a share?, share price, how payments are made, location and time of pick-up and length of season. You should also include information such as Farm history and background, growing methods, crop harvest schedule, preference lists, explanation of other programs the farm offers and photos and art work.

Involving the Community through Social Programs

is important to involve the community through social programs. There are a couple questions that should be answered as you are doing this. Does it fit the goals of the CSA? Does it meet the needs of the community?. You should identify the clients and determining the level of involvement, identify partnerships for success, match shares, corporate sponsors and have access to federal food dollars.

Are Working Shares Right for your Farm?

To determine if working shares are right for your farm you should answer a few questions. How do they work? How many hours for how much food? You will need to develop farm policies and liability issues in order to make this a successful program.

Farm Volunteers

You will need to determine who will organize volunteers. Figure out when you will need volunteers, regularly or occasionally, on special events or will there be volunteer days. Determine the do's and don'ts of volunteers and recognize liability considerations.

CSA Newsletters and Communication

A CSA newsletter should include the purpose of the CSA. When publishing you should consider the content, length and time considerations of the newspaper. You must also determine who will write it, how often and how will it be distributed.

Marketing your CSA

How to attract and retain shareholders

When recruiting members, a CSA will need to know how much food they will be receiving. The CSA will also need to make it convenient, need to understand the season aspect of local food and be aware that it will be more commitment than supermarket shopping. A CSA will also need to determine how and when to advertise. Determine the advantages and disadvantages of free versus paid advertisement, special interest news stories, CSA websites, church groups, schools, environmental organizations and word of mouth. In order to retain members, keep records on membership to predict the percent that will drop each year, call members who drop out and find out why and survey at the end of the season to gauge satisfaction. Ways to increase retention of members include provide excellent service and quality, provide convenient pick-up sites and flexible times for pick-up, encourage sharing, engage members in on-farm activities and make members feel they are important.

Resources and References

- [Appropriate Technology Transfer for Rural Areas \(ATTRA\)](#)
- Alternative Farming Information Center - National Agriculture Library Research Service
- The Biodynamic Farming and Gardening Association
- Sustainable Agriculture Network
- The Center for Sustainable Living - Robyn Van En Center
- Southern Sustainable Agriculture Working Group

Publications, Newsletters and Periodicals

- Sharing the Harvest - Elizabeth Henderson and Robyn Van En
- Farms of Tomorrow Revisited - Groh and McFadden
- From Asparagus to Zucchini: A Guide to Farm Fresh Seasonal Produce - Madison Area Community Supported Agriculture Coalition
- Growing for Market: News and Ideas for Market Gardeners: Fairplain Publications
- The Community Farm: A Voice for CSA

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