What Is Community Supported Agriculture?¹
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Overview
This document explores and explains Community Supported Agriculture. The document includes steps to develop a CSA including legal concerns, distribution systems, brochure development, and a list of resources.

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 philosophically, the community’s farm, with the growers and consumers providing mutual support and sharing the risks and benefits of food production. There are many other definitions that define a CSA. Kelley, Kime, and Harper (2013), authors of Community Supported Agriculture (CSA), define a CSA as “a concept designed to encourage relationships between consumers and growers and for consumers to become more knowledgeable about the way their food is grown” (p. 1). The consumers agree to provide direct, up-front support for the local growers who will produce their food. The growers agree to do their best to provide a sufficient quantity and quality of food to meet the needs and expectations of the consumers and to educate their consumers on their growing methods.

Within this general arrangement of shared interests there is room for much variation, depending on the resources and desires of the participants. Elizabeth Henderson (2007), co-author of Sharing the Harvest: A Citizen’s Guide to Community Supported Agriculture, 2nd Edition, describes a CSA as “a connection between a nearby farmer and the people who eat the food that the farmer produces.” Robyn Van En sums it up as “food producers + food consumers + annual commitment to one another = CSA and untold possibilities” (p. 3). Farmers feed the people, and the people share in the risks and potential bounty of the harvests (Henderson & Van En, 2007).

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Differences between CSA and Subscription Farming

CSAs are different from subscription farms. Subscription farms ask their consumers to pay for their produce upfront, before the produce is harvested and delivered. In subscription farming, the producer owes the consumer for what they have paid for in advance. For example, if the consumer pays for one month of produce, the producer owes the consumer one month’s worth of produce. If a freeze occurs and the producer can only supply the consumer with three weeks’ worth of produce, they still owe the consumer one week’s worth of produce. This is different from a CSA where the consumer takes a gamble when purchasing a share. If the same freeze affects a CSA, the consumer of the CSA is just out of luck.

History

The CSA movement began in Japan and Europe. CSAs were introduced in the United States in 1986. Currently, there are approximately 1000 CSAs in the United States. Indian Line Farm in Massachusetts and Temple-Wilton Community Farm in New Hampshire were the first CSAs in the United States, both beginning in 1986.

Different Types of CSAs

There are four different types of CSAs that Mary Holz-Clause (2009) defined in Understanding Community Supported Agriculture. In a subscription CSA, the farmer organizes and makes most of the management decisions. In a shareholder CSA, consumers manage the CSA and hire a farmer to grow what they want. In a farmer cooperative, two or more farms pool their produce to supply customers. In a farmer-consumer cooperative, the farmer and consumers co-own the land and other resources and cooperate to produce the food (Holz-Clause, 2009).

According to Bruch and Ernst (2010), although CSAs come in a variety of forms, “most offer their members a seasonal supply of fresh, local, competitively priced produce or other farm products, a direct relationship with the farmer producing their food, an opportunity to learn about agriculture and local ecosystems, and a community-building connection with farmers and other CSA members” (p. 2).

Reasons Consumers Join CSAs

There are many reasons consumers join CSAs. One reason is that the consumer is able to get produce that has not been shipped. The produce is grown locally, reducing the price and damage of shipping. Since the produce is grown locally, the money paid for the produce is invested in locally owned and operated farms. Another reason to join a CSA is that a consumer is able to get items that are typically unavailable in the supermarket. Consumers join CSAs to support local farmers, have access to fresh, high quality produce, access to organic or pesticide-free produce, and/or increase participation in community and environmental awareness. Not only can a CSA decrease costs for its members, it also gives consumers an inside view as to what the process of growing food really involves.

Formation of a CSA

According to Henderson and Van En (2007), when forming a CSA, “members and farmers converge into a vital and creative community, which celebrates diversity, both social and biological, and makes food justice and security a living reality” (p. 33). With a guaranteed market and income, the farmers can prioritize growing high-quality food. Converting to CSA is easiest for farmers who own a piece of land and some equipment, have a few years of experience growing vegetables for market, and have established a following of customers. The obstacles multiply for farmers without land and would-be farmers without the experience in growing for market. Yet around the country, many people have found ways to get started once they made up their minds (Henderson & Van En, 2007).

These authors propose 8 steps to forming a CSA.

1. Initiators (either farmers or groups of non-farmers) issue a call to form a CSA.
2. Hold exploratory meeting of prospective sharers and farmer(s).
3. At this meeting or a subsequent meeting, come to agreement on the group’s values.
4. Organize the core group.
5. The core group recruits members for first season.
6. Members make commitments to the CSA.
7. Establish the legal status of the CSA. Many groups defer decisions on legal structure for a season or two. Advice from a lawyer may be helpful.
8. Determine capitalization of the farm(s). Many CSAs start with a minimum of rented or borrowed land and equipment. For the longer term, decisions must be made about purchases and maintenance (Henderson & Van En, 2007).
Operation of a Successful CSA

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 involves an 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 the distribution process. 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. Responsibilities of the core groups often include:

- Determining what crops will be grown.
- Determining what the fees will be, who will pay the fees, and when they will be due.
- Selecting farmers.
- Selecting land to use for farming.
- Assigns duties to members when and if needed.
- Determines the distribution process.

An Example: Core Group Activities for Plowshares CSA

Monthly meetings are held at which members receive farm status updates, a treasurer’s report and review newsletter articles. Members publish newsletters and brochures, organize special events and programs, and manage membership.

Organization of a Core Group

Different roles for core group members are possible. 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 the membership coordinator, keeps a schedule of payment, deposits fees, writes checks to farmer, does bookkeeping, and maintains a bank account. Core group leadership positions 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 the farmer for on-farm events. The needy family coordinator identifies families for free shares, contacts families for the farmer and insures that food gets to families.

Calculation of a Share Cost

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

Goods That CSAs Offer

CSAs should offer information to consumers about seasonal variations in Florida (e.g., winter squash in April), focus on a variety of common vegetables, and fresh, high quality. You will never find two CSAs that are alike. Nearly all CSAs provide produce but they also can and often do provide other things such as cut flowers, plants, and animal products such as honey, eggs, and meat. CSAs not only offer food, they also offer an unforgettable experience. In a marketing article published by the Sustainable Agriculture Network (SAN) (2006), Paul Muller, one of four Full Belly Farm partners from northern California, said that they “have great relationships with our end users—they are the ones we grow for, and they have confidence in our integrity” (p. 5). Full Belly Farm has been organic for nearly three decades and hosts an award-winning annual festival that features food, music, farm tours, and kids’ activities (SAN, 2006).
Survey Methods
Methods of surveying members may include a rating system in a brochure, communicating, listening, and observing. Surveying can provide members a chance to make their feelings known and can provide a CSA an opportunity to know what to produce, what members like about the CSA, and what needs to be changed. Many CSAs survey during the season as well as at the end of the season.

Supplementing: Benefits and Drawbacks
Some CSAs supplement from other sources the range and total amount of products sold by the CSA. 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. Many CSAs grow all of the food that they provide to the members while others supplement with food products from other farms. Some considerations for supplementing product include adjustment of share prices, partnership with local farmers, maintaining the philosophy of CSA, delivery schedules, 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. Kelley et al. (2013) recommend several pick-up sites including the farm, farmers’ markets, and central sites such as food cooperatives (co-ops), health stores, churches, and community parks. Home delivery and mail delivery are possible distribution options as well.

Developing Your Brochure
When developing your brochure, you must consider the basics such as the CSA philosophy, defining 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 artwork. There is an example of a brochure in the pdf version of this document.

Community Involvement through Social Programs
It 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 potential consumers and determine the level of involvement, identify partnerships for success, match shares, target corporate sponsors, and have access to possible 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 recognize liability issues in order to make this a successful program. Members and volunteers will need to be made aware of these policies from the beginning to prevent any misunderstandings.

Farm Volunteers
You will need to determine who will organize volunteers. Figure out when you will need volunteers, regularly or occasionally or on special events. Will there be volunteer days? Determine the do’s and don’ts of volunteers and recognize liability considerations. Determine who will be allowed to volunteer and work on the farm. Will you allow children under 18 years of age to volunteer? Do they need to have adult supervision? These issues will need to be addressed before volunteers begin their work.

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 newsletter. You must also determine who will write it, how often, and how and when it will be distributed. Email newsletters are also an attractive option for spreading CSA information and news.
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 membership convenient, need to understand the seasonal aspect of local food production and be aware that it will require a greater 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 to find out why, and survey at the end of the season to gauge satisfaction. Ways to increase retention of members include providing excellent service and quality, providing convenient pick-up sites and flexible times for pick-up, encouraging sharing, engaging members in on-farm activities, and making sure members know they are important.

Legality

Henderson and Van En (2007) discuss the legalities involved with a CSA. “Most CSAs carry standard liability insurance. As separate coverage, liability can be very expensive; as part of a farm insurance package, the price is more reasonable. You should try to get a liability policy that includes a stated level of medical expenses paid out without a lawsuit. Some CSAs have additional liability as a special form of ‘pick-your-own’ farming operations. The rates for ‘pick-your-own’ will be lower if you specify that you do not use synthetic pesticides and members do not use equipment, horses or ladders. Pick-your-own coverage will allow members to help harvest and to use hand tools. Keep a first-aid kit handy” (p. 131).

“A CSA can adopt a variety of legal structures. Each group should determine which form is most appropriate. Some CSAs are ‘sole proprietors’ or partnerships; in other words, both farm and CSA business are the property of the farmers. Other CSAs separate the CSA from the ownership of the land. The land may be held as a sole proprietorship, a partnership, or a corporation, while the CSA is an unincorporated associate or is incorporated as a nonprofit corporation. Groups of farmers can organize as farmer-owned cooperatives. There is no set structure in the law for food co-ops or buying clubs, so groups of consumers can change the corporate structure that suits them best in forming a CSA. Institutional CSAs usually hold both the land and the CSA as part of a nonprofit corporation. Each form has advantages and disadvantages. The details of these legalities will vary from state to state” (Henderson & Van En, 2007, p. 126).

Resources

Agricultural Marketing Resource Center: http://www.agmrc.org/

Appropriate Technology Transfer for Rural Areas (ATTRA): http://www.attra.org

Alternative Farming Information Center: https://afsic.nal.usda.gov/

Biodynamic Association: http://www.biodynamics.com

Penn State Extension: http://extension.psu.edu

Sustainable Agriculture Network: http://www.sare.org

The Center for Sustainable Living—Robyn Van En Center: http://www.wilson.edu/robyn-van-en-center

Southern Sustainable Agriculture Working Group: http://www.ssawg.org

University of Tennessee Extension: https://extension.tennessee.edu/Pages/default.aspx

Publications, Newsletters, and Periodicals


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References


Sample Brochure
Please see the pdf of this document for the Sample Brochure.
FRESH-TO-YOU FARM
Organic and Farm Fresh Produce

123 Main Street
Yourtown, Florida
32307
(356)987-6543

Now Accepting Membership Applications! Fill Out Your Application on the Back of this Brochure Today!

What is CSA? CSA is community supported agriculture that allows the customer direct access to farm fresh produce as well as the opportunity to learn where his or her food comes from and to participate in farming activities.

For more information or a tour of the farm, call (356) 987-6543.

September 2003
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Name: ____________________________
Address: ____________________________

Phone (days): ____________ (evenings) ____________
Email address: ______________ Fax: ______________

I would like to purchase:
___ One full share ($475)
___ One half share ($290)
___ 4 Week Trial ($115)

Payment Options:
___ Check or money order for full amount now
___ Check or money order for $50 now and remaining balance will be
   paid in full by Oct. 15

I would prefer pickup on:
___ Monday  ___ Tuesday  ___Thursday  ___ I’m flexible

The following people are allowed to pick up my share if I cannot do so:
________________________________________________________________________

I understand that there will be no refunds given after November 1st. I also understand that each
week my share will include different types and amounts of produce. I understand that if I do not
pick up my share myself or it is not picked up by someone who is authorized to do so by the end of
the designated pick up time, that my share will be donated to a worthy recipient.

_________________________  __________________________
Signature  Date

September 2003