

EIGHT TIPS FROM THE EXPERTS TO MAKE YOUR COMMUNITY SHARED AGRICULTURE PROJECT A SUCCESS

by Amunda Salm

To me, ecological agriculture is a way of having more control over knowing where my food comes from because then I know that the methods of production reflect greater environmental responsibility. As a graduate student in Ecological Agriculture, I chose as my thesis topic to look at community shared agriculture (CSA), the strongest link between Canadians and their food unless one is producing oneself. I wanted to determine, ultimately, whether CSA provides consumers with greater access to information about where their food comes from, production methods and so on. To do this, in October and November of last year, I sent a socio-economic survey to all CSA producers on the list of the CSA Resource Centre in Wroxeter, Ontario, asking for their perspectives on this form of marketing. I also personally interviewed as many of these producers as possible in the vicinity of Ottawa and southern Ontario. The questionnaire tried to inventorise how CSA looks in Canada, and then to look at the various ways consumer members become involved in the farm beyond simply buying food. Forty current and six former CSA operators responded to the survey. All except two use organic methods, and over half are certified. A quarter of the responding growers choose CSA as their main marketing strategy, and three depend on it for their total household income. The membership base for this sample averaged 42 members, with the largest CSA having 112 members. Many interesting issues came up in this sample based on growers' experiences, and I have summarized the more pertinent findings in the form of advice to new producers. Since this study concentrated on the voices of growers, it would be interesting to see some research conducted among consumer members of CSAs in order to get their viewpoint on this marketing system.;

Community Shared Agriculture (CSA) is an alternative local food system which first emerged in Canada in 1989. A direct link was set up between a specific group of consumers and one or more farmers to address two main problems: farmers bearing all the risks in food production and consumers needing more awareness of where their food comes from. In return for a weekly basket filled with whatever is harvestable at that time, most of the responding operators have members pay a lump sum in advance for a share in the season's harvest, although 13% prefer to work on a pay-as-you-order basis.

Here is what experienced CSA operators suggest to those considering this type of marketing. Quotes have been taken directly from the surveys.

1. Talk to other CSA farmers

The most helpful source of information for setting up a CSA comes from other CSA operators. In addition, it is best to experience farming (e.g., by apprenticing on a CSA or by

market gardening) first in order to see if it suits your needs and abilities. Also, if you have very little growing experience, don't start right away with a CSA.

2. Start small

Many stressed that the best way to get into CSA is to start with a small group and to experiment for the first year to find a manageable cropping plan. "Realize the difference between farming and gardening; make sure you can do a 30-40 crop polyculture before you sign up 100 shares." Also important are capital ("You can't expect to make money from the start"), another source of income and long-term access to land.

3. Be prepared to work very hard

The first year is the hardest, but it gets easier with time; for example, with time members will spread the word to other potential customers about the CSA, and thus do your recruiting for you. In this sample, it was found that most of the workload in CSA is carried by the farmers and their families. Half of the CSAs receive some help from their members, averaging to 7% of the workload (varying from 0.5% to 40% of total workload). Two-thirds of the CSAs also depend on hired and nonmember volunteer labor contributions, averaging to 23% of the workload. When members contribute, they help in distribution, harvesting and outreach. Although having members experience the farm firsthand is part of the idea behind CSA, many of the farmers find that this requires a lot of their energy to organize. Some ideas were provided on how to get members to participate more: setting up compulsory work as part of every share (e.g., 2.5 days a season; one day of work or pay \$25 for someone else to do it); setting up working shares for a reduced rate (a quarter reported at least one member joining in this way); linking participation to learning a skill (organic or food preservation workshops); or linking work with social activities (e.g., "weed & feed").

4. Try to set up a core group

Half of the CSAs had managed to set up a core group of members they can regularly consult, especially for help in times of heavy workload and outreach to members. For example, two members on one CSA took over all the tasks involved in providing a newsletter to members; another set up a committee to manage the garden's irrigation system. As a variation on a core group, another CSA (which works on a pay-as-you-order basis) has set up a rotating committee of members coordinating orders and drop-off outlets: "independently they need to figure out order details, and do the marketing for the farm themselves."

5. Research consumer base in area

One of the biggest problems was found to be distance to members. It is difficult to build up a strong membership base from the local communities. "Do some preliminary marketing research to ensure there is a market. We have had enormous amounts of publicity yet have only TWO local share-members out of over 100. It may not be feasible in very rural areas

unless there's a city nearby to draw from" (3-year CSA). Also, "in some rural areas, if people are into organics, they will grow it themselves." One 7-year CSAer has even experienced adverse reactions to CSA and organics in his local farming community: "If you live in a conventional area, you confront hostility." When members are scattered in different locations, then a lot of time and finances become shifted towards transportation. And if members are far away, it is even more difficult to get them to become involved in the farm. One 5-year CSA operator stated that he finds communities with a high proportion of 25- to 35-year olds with children to be the best to target.

6. Depend on many marketing outlets

As mentioned above, most CSAers depend on various strategies to sell their produce. From a 6-year CSA: "Always grow a CUSHION of excess veggies, with some backup form of marketing for excess."

7. Try to carry on through the winter

In Canada, the CSA season is very short – 4 months on average in this sample. Very few (7 CSAs) offer produce as part of the CSA "deal" through the winter, and 6 others keep selling to members on a separate pay-as-you-order basis. Most CSAs concentrate on fresh vegetables and herbs, with less than half offering fruits/berries and storage crops. Very few offer other products such as flowers (8), value-added foods (8 – e.g., pesto, jam, maple syrup, etc.), chicken and eggs (3) within their CSA. As one 5-year CSAer states: "Don't stop during the winter – members forget about you – you should try to keep the CSA going once a month during the winter. There is enough organic stuff out there, fresh or for canning . . ."

8. Cooperate with other farmers

Many mentioned the difficulty of providing a wide diversity within such a short time. Sharing the risks with consumer members includes the risk of failed crops. Half of the responding CSAs keep to this principle, communicating difficulties to members. However, many are not comfortable with this concept and buy from or exchange with other farmers to supplement losses. Three of the responding CSAs include more than one farmer/farm working for a common membership base, which reduces the stress of a wide cropping plan and allows for more flexibility in times of crop failures. The drawbacks would be less of a personal connection between members and a farm, as well as a less diverse (and possibly sustainable) farm system.

What of members?

All but one CSA operator responded that awareness about agriculture/food issues is raised amongst their members. Also, most (37) find that members are at least a bit interested in being involved in joint decisions about food distribution, outreach and problem solving. None of the responding farmers found that they had less control over their work when compared to other marketing strategies. In fact, they provided many examples of positive

solutions coming from discussions with their members (e.g.: loans, suggestions on how to make distribution system more efficient, members taking on tasks, accepting that crop appearance might be affected by weather or pests, etc.). "A lot more things become possible when a group of people get a little enthusiasm for past success (i.e., a good harvest year) and start to take some ownership or responsibility for the future success of something like this. In other words, they seem to get better as they mature." (7-year CSA).

One of the conclusions of this study was that there is a need to establish a strong network of CSA in Canada in order to share information and experiences better. The CSA Resource Centre has recently moved to Ecological Agriculture Projects (EAP), just outside Montreal. If you would like to get more information on CSA or a longer version of this study, contact:

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Amunda Salm recently completed an MSc degree in Ecological Agriculture at Wageningen University in Holland, in a coordinated effort with Macdonald College of McGill University. This article is a summary of thesis research conducted in Canada. Amunda would like to operate a CSA in Canada one day.

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