

**Community Shared Agriculture** (also known as Community Supported Agriculture or CSA for short) is a direct-marketing based, farm business model which has growing appeal for profitability and community economic development impact. The basic CSA model is simple; consumers purchase annual “shares” in exchange for weekly deliveries of predetermined, seasonal produce. The arrangement generally involves sharing production risks/benefits between the consumer and farmer. The model has roots in Japan and Europe, emerging in North America in 1984 with the opening of Indian Line Farm CSA in Massachusetts. Increasing consumer demands for local, organic food for health, security, environmental and economic reasons has enabled the growth of both the number of CSA farms in North America (now 1000+) and the evolution of the business model.

The model is not suited for every farm and business, but it does provide some interesting ideas and lessons such as direct customer communication, subscription based revenues, customized and niche products and home/direct delivery. This two-part edition of the Digest explores how farmers and communities are utilizing the CSA model (or CSA Best Management Practices) to capture new opportunities and enhance community and business viability.

The Innovation & Opportunity Digest is intended to stimulate discussion and facilitate the identification and capturing of new business opportunities in Nova Scotia's Agri-Food sectors. If you have news items, press releases, ideas, web-sites or other resources you would like to contribute to the Digest, or to report technical issues, or join the mailing list, please e-mail the Business Development & Economics Division [coughljp@gov.ns.ca](mailto:coughljp@gov.ns.ca).

### Opportunities:

#### Introduction to CSA

- CSA lets consumers commission crops directly from local growers
- Marketing with CSAs
- CSA Advantages, Challenges & Tips

#### CSA Support Organizations

- Madison Area CSA Coalition (Wisconsin)
- Equiterre (Quebec)
- Land Stewardship Project (Minnesota)

### Business Development/Management Toolbox

- ACORN CSA Manual for the Maritimes
- How to Develop and Run a Successful CSA
- Managing a CSA: Production, Labour, Land, Community, Economics, Marketing & Training
- Direct Marketing & Small Farm Viability Course
- CSA Management Spreadsheets

### Analysis / Best Practices

- The Origins of CSA in North America
- CSA from a Farm Business Mindset
- Growing Food & Community: CSA Takes Root
- Advice for Attracting and Retaining Members

*Back issues of the Digest can be downloaded from  
Cover photo courtesy of Heather Lekx at Ignatius Farm CSA*

[www.gov.ns.ca/nsaf/bmed/digest](http://www.gov.ns.ca/nsaf/bmed/digest)  
[www.ignatiusguelph.ca/csa.html](http://www.ignatiusguelph.ca/csa.html)



## Opportunities

### Introduction to Community Shared Agriculture

#### A Growing Phenomenon: CSA lets consumers commission crops directly from local growers

<http://www.patriotledger.com/articles/2005/03/30/life/life01.txt>

Community Shared Agriculture farms seek to reverse the trend in agriculture where in the United States farmers are getting \$0.26 of each food dollar Americans spend (down from \$0.41 in 1950). In this production system, farmers are guaranteed a reliable price and market for a wide variety of crops. In return, shareholders are assured high-quality produce and value. A 1997 study cited in the article shows that a 700-pound seasonal share of CSA organic vegetables cost \$450. To buy an equivalent amount of the same organic vegetables in the supermarket cost \$1,132. That point is illustrated by Golden Rule Farm where 85 shares are issued for \$500 per season (approximately \$25 per week). Every week from June through November boxes weighing anywhere from 5 to 15 pounds deliver fresh lettuce, onions, peas, spinach, carrots, beets, tomatoes, peppers, cucumbers, melons, squash, potatoes, kale, turnips and pie pumpkins.

#### Marketing with CSAs - Community Shared (Supported) Agriculture

<http://www.gov.on.ca/OMAFRA/english/crops/hort/news/vegnews/2004/vg0404a3.htm>

A CSA is a farming system in which a group of individuals pledge support for the farm and share the risks and the rewards. The mechanics of the CSA varies from farm to farm, determined by the farmer and customers. Each member of the group agrees to pay a share (fee) in the spring with the understanding that they will get a "box" of produce each week throughout the season (20+ weeks). Shares typical run \$400-500, but vary based on size (full, half or family sizes) and contents. CSA core production is generally vegetables, but shares may also include fruits, meat, flowers, honey, value-added products and seasonal specialties like Christmas trees and pumpkins. CSA farms are typically small (2-5 acres in production for the CSA), have a wide range of crops (25 to 50+) and generally employ organic production methods. CSAs generally deliver high returns per acre, but also have high labour, management and marketing time and costs.

#### Overview Community Shared Agriculture – Advantages, Challenges and Tips

<http://www.sfc.ucdavis.edu/pubs/SFNews/archive/93111.htm>

Some CSA practitioners hail the concept as a way to revitalize the deteriorating family farm, to promote organic agriculture and to help consumers create their own food systems in the increasingly impersonal and detached world of agribusiness and supermarkets. Advantages to marketing utilizing a CSA include:

- Satisfies consumer demands for fresh, local, organic products in a high-value format
- Advance payment for produce creates working capital at planting time to purchase equipment and supplies as needed. The CSA system enables better off-season planning as sales volumes are known.
- The subscription base means greater financial security and credibility for credit (loan or mortgage) and risk management (inclement weather, crop failure).
- Opportunities to reduce costs/increase value through subscriber 'work shares' and direct centralized delivery.
- CSAs promote urban-rural linkages and connections - rural to urban and customer to farmers.

Operating a CSA comes with unique challenges:

- Produce selection is limited to what member farms can produce and what is in season
- CSA farms require significant management expertise; farms often offer 25 to 50+ different crops (and thus production challenges), have staggered planting, maturity and harvest times to ensure continuous supply, weekly processing and delivery requirements, and significant planning, marketing and record keeping.
- People skills are required to network, interact, recruit and retain customers. CSA farmers have weekly interactions with their subscribers and annual events and planning meetings.

*Additional information on Community Shared Agriculture can be found at:*

The Robyn Van En Center CSA Resources  
ATTRA CSA Business Management Factsheet  
USDA/AFSIC Introduction to CSAs  
UMass Extension CSA Resources  
NewFarm.org CSA Resource Page

[www.csacenter.org](http://www.csacenter.org)  
<http://www.attra.org/attra-pub/csa.html>  
<http://www.nal.usda.gov/afsic/csa>  
[www.umassvegetable.org/food\\_farming\\_systems/CSA/csa\\_site/index.html](http://www.umassvegetable.org/food_farming_systems/CSA/csa_site/index.html)  
<http://www.newfarm.org/archive/csaresourcepage.shtml>

## Community Shared Agriculture Organizations:

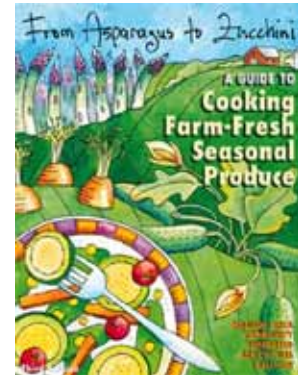
*Regional sponsor and support organizations can have a significant impact on the development and prosperity of Community Shared Agriculture enterprises. Assistance ranges from grower guides and directories, to CSA management and marketing capacity building, to regional and seasonal recipe books and to management, recruitment and logistics. The organizations are generally a partnership of farmer, consumer and community special interests.*

### Madison Area Community Supported Agriculture Coalition

<http://www.madison.com/wsj/home/local/index.php?ntid=31705>

<http://www.macsac.org>

The Madison, Wisconsin (population 208,000 in 2002) association's website lists 16 area farms this season. The member farms supplied 2,200 shareholders last year, which translates into around 8,000 or 9,000 people regularly eating CSA grown food. The core of the offering is a wide variety of mixed organic vegetables and cut flowers, but for the first time, a cheese, milk and egg farm has joined the program. The subscribers are seen as investors in the farm's season and are attracted to the idea for a wide variety of reasons – for environmental, economic, health, or urban/rural community building reasons or just to access high quality food. In addition to the directory, the MACSAC produces a cookbook "From Asparagus to Zucchini" which promotes local, seasonal eating and operates the *Partner Shares Program*. The program links CSA farms with low income and special needs households. *Partner Shares* participants pay at subsidized rates for their share and in monthly installments. Share prices are lowered through financial assistance provided by a community fundraising supported, revolving assistance fund.



[www.macsac.org](http://www.macsac.org)

### Equiterre: A network of 70 CSA farms and 5,000 subscribers in Quebec

[http://www.newfarm.org/international/canada\\_don/quebecCSA/DTroisPierres.shtml](http://www.newfarm.org/international/canada_don/quebecCSA/DTroisPierres.shtml)

<http://www.equiterre.qc.ca/english/home/indexfinal2.html>

The D-Trois-Pierres farm near Montreal has grown from 26 participant subscribers to 134 in five years thanks to promotional and support work from the Equiterre organization. Equiterre is an umbrella management organization for a Quebec-wide CSA network. Equiterre publishes an annual directory of affiliated CSA farms and their produce then utilizes it to create media buzz through newspapers and broadcast media. One of the unique features of the initiative is that when individual farms attain an optimum size of stable subscribers (150), the farm is no longer advertised. Quota-filled farms are allowed to continue taking subscribers; they just aren't listed as 'available' in the brochure. The 'supply management' of customers helps new and smaller farms grow. When participating farms have made their quota, they pay about 2% of their profits to Equiterre. In addition to being a marketer, Equiterre serves as an intermediary between consumers and farmers, assisting both parties in resolving complaints and adjusting to the seasonal nature of CSA production. CSA popularity in Quebec has experienced tremendous growth thanks in a large part to the efforts of Equiterre. In the Montreal area for example, demand for CSA produce exceeds the available supply of farmers. Community Shared Agriculture involves considerable work to produce, harvest and package a wide diversity of crops and communicate with new and existing customers. Equiterre's assists farmers in some of the management challenges and also brokers a CSA mentoring program between new and established CSA growers.

### Land Stewardship Project (Minnesota) CSA Guide

<http://www.landstewardshipproject.org/pdf/csa.pdf>

Each spring, the Land Stewardship Project publishes a directory of Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) Farms serving the Minneapolis-St. Paul area. The guide lists 24 farms and discusses considerations for subscribers such as location, pick-up site/delivery day, length of season/number of deliveries, types of produce and other food items and opportunities for involvement such as farm days and work shares.



2005 Edition of the Twin Cities Region  
Community Supported Agriculture  
Farm Directory



## Business Development / Management Toolbox

In addition to production expertise in the produce, livestock or value-added merchandises of choice, successful Community Shared Agriculture operations may require additional management skills and techniques:

- Product planting, harvest and storage scheduling to ensure full season availability,
- Adept customer service skills to recruit and retain subscribers and adjust the product mix,
- Acting as a promoter and host to include customers in the farm experience,
- Managing risk through relationships, planning and shared responsibility,
- Teaching and sharing production and management knowledge through the use of apprentices and volunteers.

### Atlantic Canadian Organic Regional Network: CSA Manual for the Maritimes

<http://www.acornorganic.org/pdf/CSA%20Manual.pdf>

[http://www.organicagcentre.ca/VirtualFarmTour/vft\\_sunroot\\_profile.html](http://www.organicagcentre.ca/VirtualFarmTour/vft_sunroot_profile.html)

This comprehensive resource provides an overview of CSA activity in the Maritimes (2001) profiling several operations and their innovative partnerships with customers and third parties such as social development agencies and churches. The manual provides general information such as the concept overview, benefits and considerations for farmers thinking about CSA. It also provides specific start-up and management tools, including guidelines for brochures and promotional material, management and crop failure policies, season schedules, correspondence such as letters of introduction and season evaluation. The document concludes with 8 tips from the experts to make your CSA project a success – *Talk to other CSA growers, Start small, Work very hard, Establish a core group, Do local consumer research, Diversify sales (not just CSA), Extend the season and Cooperate with other farms.*



[www.organicagcentre.ca](http://www.organicagcentre.ca)

### How to Develop and Run a Successful CSA: Opportunities for Small Growers

[http://www.kerrcenter.com/publications/2002\\_proceedings/successful\\_CSA.pdf](http://www.kerrcenter.com/publications/2002_proceedings/successful_CSA.pdf)

A wealth of experience, gained through 15 years of CSA development and management are shared by the author. Dan Nagengast has operated not only his own CSA, but been a part of the development of the Rolling Prairie Farmers Alliance, a multi-farm CSA partnership. (*more information on Rolling Prairie and other CSA alliances in the next issue of the Digest*). While a great variety of CSA structures and styles exist, the article outlines some of the general advantages and disadvantages of the system. In addition, the article outlines pathways for start-up, utilizing the subscription business model, recruiting and retaining customers, role, responsibilities and required hours, production, storage and distribution issues and legal considerations. The specific challenges of operating a multi-farm CSA are also discussed including grower and crop compatibility, recognizing and capturing member skills such as marketing or accounting and collaborating to supply larger customers.

### Managing a CSA Farm 1: Production, Labor and Land

[http://www.cias.wisc.edu/archives/1999/03/01/managing\\_a\\_csa\\_farm\\_1production\\_labor\\_and\\_land/index.php](http://www.cias.wisc.edu/archives/1999/03/01/managing_a_csa_farm_1production_labor_and_land/index.php)

Farmers using the community supported agriculture (CSA) model can expect both rewards and challenges in this intense, diversified, community-oriented approach. A solid understanding of CSA and effective management will help CSA farmers overcome challenges in production, labor, and conserving and securing land

### Managing a CSA Farm 2: Community, Economics, Marketing and Training

[http://www.cias.wisc.edu/archives/1999/03/01/managing\\_a\\_csa\\_farm\\_2\\_community\\_economics\\_marketing\\_and\\_training/index.php](http://www.cias.wisc.edu/archives/1999/03/01/managing_a_csa_farm_2_community_economics_marketing_and_training/index.php)

Community supported agriculture (CSA) farmers need communication and management skills to meet a variety of challenges in building a community of members, balancing income and expenses, marketing their farm, and obtaining training. A farmer-led research team including John Hendrickson and Marcy Ostrom, researchers for the Center for Integrated Agricultural Systems (CIAS), completed several case studies of CSA farms in Wisconsin and Minnesota.

## Teaching Direct Marketing and Small Farm Viability: Chapter 4: Community Supported Agriculture

<http://zzyx.ucsc.edu/casfs/training/manuals/tdm/contents.html>

The Center for Agroecology & Sustainable Food Systems is a research, education, and public service program at the University of California, Santa Cruz, dedicated to increasing ecological sustainability and social justice in the food and agriculture system. The Center recently published *Teaching Direct Marketing and Small Farm Viability: Resources for Instructors* to help develop the suite of skills farmers and other food entrepreneurs require for economic success - finding land, planning what to grow, marketing the crops, and managing income and expenses. Resources for Instructors provides information on a wide variety of resources for teaching a variety of skills and topics related to small farm viability, including direct marketing, business planning, and land tenure options. It also offers an overview of small farm viability and produce marketing to give agriculture students, farm apprentices, and other trainees a context for the challenges that small-scale growers face in developing an economically viable farming operation. The chapter on CSA provides the following sections: (each title is directly linked)

- [Unit 4.1 CSA History](#)
- [Unit 4.2 CSA Structure and Organization](#)
- [Unit 4.3 CSA Outreach](#)
- [Unit 4.4 CSA Administration](#)
- [Unit 4.5 CSA Crop Planning](#)
- [Unit 4.6 CSA Crop Rotation and Soil Fertility](#)
- [Unit 4.7 CSA Harvest and Post-Harvest Handling](#)



### Market Farm Forms:

#### Spreadsheet Templates for Planning and Organizing Information on Diversified Farms

<http://www.nwpub.net/marcie.html>

Marcie Rosenzweig of Full Circle Farm in California has developed a computer-based record keeping system. It is designed to help organize and calculate the mix of vegetables and related crops raised by market gardeners, truck farmers, and CSAs. Included are a 95-page book and a diskette containing Excel spreadsheet templates available in PC or Macintosh formats. Among the records that can be kept and/or calculated with this system are: seeds and purchased plants needed, farm-grown transplants, soil amendments and fertilizers, cropping and succession timelines, weekly task lists, crop yield and income projections, actual harvest and income data, produce availability sheets, invoices and pick sheets, Community Supported Agriculture share and yield sheets, budget worksheets, row calculations and input sheets, CSA share bed calculations and input sheets, certified organic producer certificate sheets, fax sheets, labels, order forms, point of sales labels, recipes, and flyers. The resource costs \$45 USD.

#### Diversified Farm Crop Planning and Record Keeping Spreadsheets

<http://www.brookfieldfarm.org/cps.html>

Dan Kaplan of Brookfield Farm in Amherst, Massachusetts has developed a series of Microsoft Excel spreadsheets to help keeping track of seed inventory, planting dates, greenhouse schedules, field records, and harvest records for the 500 shareholder CSA. He produces over 250 varieties of over 50 crops in a 25 week season. The collection of spreadsheets will help farmers answer questions such as - how many pounds of beet seeds do I need to order to make sure all of my customers are happy in July? What date do I need to seed how many flats of broccoli in the greenhouse to have enough starts to plant on May 15th? Where did I plant my carrots last year? The software can assist in creating a crop plan, field planting schedule, field plan, seed order, greenhouse schedule, field records, and harvest records. The MS Excel Spreadsheets cost \$25 USD.



## Analysis / Best Practices

### Community Farms in the 21st Century: Poised for Another Wave of Growth? Part I: The Origins of CSA in America

<http://www.thenewfarm.org/features/0104/csa-history/part1.shtml>

Against a backdrop of declining small farm numbers, Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) has taken root in North America with moderate speed, gradually growing to include as many as 1,700 farms. In addition to the consumer/producer direct marketing connections and mutual support, CSA promotes environmental stewardship and healthy communities. As the concept approaches its 20th anniversary, this two-part article reflects on the origins in North America and ponders the potential based on consumer, economic, agricultural and environmental trends. In Part 1 the author shares the events, experiences, ideas and motivation of the pioneers of the model, Temple-Wilton Community Farm and Indian Line Farm.



Indian Line CSA Farm  
[www.newfarm.org](http://www.newfarm.org)

### Approaching Community Shared Agriculture from a Farm Business Mindset

<http://stagea.cts.gov.on.ca/OMAFRA/english/busdev/facts/csa.htm>

The "successful farm business" management framework developed by the Canadian Farm Business Management Council (CFBMC) provides an effective tool to assess business management issues. The Ontario Ministry of Agriculture & Food, Agricultural Business Management utilized CFBMC framework to assess Community Shared Agriculture. It is critical for both the growth of the business model and individual CSA farms that all four framework areas are managed.

**Marketing Management:** CSA farmers must understand and produce what the consumers want to purchase (not just offer what one wants to/can grow). If demand exists for products that the CSA can't offer (soil, skill, climate, specialization, etc...), it is in the interest of the farm to source it (alliances with other CSAs, non-CSA farms or from wholesale) or risk losing customers.

**Production Management:** While variety and seasonality are critical elements of the CSA, production methods and costs must ensure reasonable prices/value and consistent supply to retain subscribers. Inter-farm cooperation may contribute to those goals if the different farms specialize or have different growing conditions or propagation skills. Crop selections are made based on customer demands and should emphasize taste, nutrition and distinctiveness.

**Human Resource Management:** CSAs generally start with a couple as the core of the business. Providing most of the farm labour, management and expertise, working and living together and having both partners' salaries based on the farm success can cause stress. Recruiting and managing volunteers from WOOFERS (World Wide Workers on Organic Farms), to apprentices, to customers, to community groups can be a critical success factor.

**Financial Management:** Despite receiving much of the farm revenue in the spring (as opposed to harvest), new CSAs face the same start-up, cash-flow and viability challenges of other farm businesses. Off-farm income/diversification is required, especially during start-up as even at 100 customers paying \$300 per share the farmer will net less than \$10,000. The subscriber base may provide opportunities for financial expertise.

## Growing Food and Community: The CSA Takes Root

[http://www.kerrcenter.com/community\\_food/CSA\\_takes\\_root.htm](http://www.kerrcenter.com/community_food/CSA_takes_root.htm)

<http://www.cias.wisc.edu/pdf/csaacross.pdf>

### Full National Survey Summary

<http://www.cias.wisc.edu/pdf/rb68.pdf>

Small family farmers are facing significant competitive pressure from large food chains and international suppliers. At the same time, Oklahomans struggle to eat enough fruits and vegetables as part of a healthy lifestyle. CSA operations in the state are striving to provide innovative solutions that bridge both problems. The article profiles several CSA farms in the state and compares them to results of a 1999 national CSA survey.

- Average age of US farmers was 54 (1997) and CSA farmers 43 (1999).
- Nationwide, less than 10 % of all farmers are women, versus nearly 40 % for CSA. While there are some large CSA farms, the median number of acres they operate nationwide is 18.
- In OK there are equal numbers of men as women operating CSAs, 20 & 30-somethings as retirees, and farms 10 acres (or smaller) can be profitable.

CSA operators in the article discuss creative solutions to for share affordability, diversification and product mix changes based on customer demands and advice on starting slowly and gradually transitioning into a CSA.



Nuyaka Natural Farm  
James and Jennifer Cooper  
Bristow, Oklahoma

## CSA NOTEBOOK: Advice for Attracting and Retaining Members

[http://www.newfarm.org/columns/CSA\\_notebook/2003/0403/insights.shtm](http://www.newfarm.org/columns/CSA_notebook/2003/0403/insights.shtm)

<http://www.newfarm.org/archive/csaresourcepage.shtml>

### CSA Resource Page

<http://www.harmonyvalleyfarm.com/index.php>

The Newfarm.org website features articles and journals written by successful CSA farmers where they share practical advice on what works, production and presentation, marketing and member retention. The Harmony Valley Farm CSA (HVF)(near La Crosse Wisconsin) has been in operation for 11 years and currently offers 75 crops grown on approximately 75 acres. The farm also markets to restaurants, wholesale, retail and farmers markets, but 50% or the produce is destined to the 500+ subscribers of the CSA. The farm has an organized renewal and retention strategy (and as a result 80-85% annual renewal rate) and can therefore offer authoritative advice on the subject.

- **Keep Subscribers happy** by providing consistent, high quality, flavourful, clean and unique (by variety and by story) product. A happy customer is a return customer.
- **Start the Renewal Process Early!** HVF sends renewal paperwork out with the last delivery in November and offers a modest incentive for renewals before Jan. 1.
- **Communicate with your customers** the importance of early subscriptions to the farm - cash flow, planning for returning numbers, and getting bookkeeping done during quieter months.
- **Consistent Pricing** is important as significant changes to share price over a pre-season or year to year can impact customer perceptions of affordability and therefore the farm's revenues.
- **Reach out to subscribers in the winter** with newsletters and website updates that they may use to show friends about the CSA. Your happiest customers are your best recruiters.
- **Have a plan** for the last minute push. Be aware of your numbers and follow-up on the phone with subscribers who have not yet renewed. Even if they don't sign on again, you may gain invaluable information or become aware of problems.

In **Community Shared Agriculture Part 2: The Next Level**, the Digest will explore:

[Multi-farm and CSA Alliances](#)

[Diversification](#)

[CSAs for Seafood?](#)

[CSA as an Investment](#)

[H.R. Management and Development](#)

[Tools in the Business Management Library](#)

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