Expanding Your Market: The Multi-Farm Community Supported Agriculture Model

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Abstract

Community Supported Agriculture, or CSA, is an alternative food system. It represents an informal agreement forged on an annual basis between a farmer and a group of members to produce and distribute food. Members, sometimes referred to as shareholders, are people concerned about where their food comes from, how it is grown, and by whom. A typical CSA provides vegetables to a group of shareholders who have paid a fee to receive a share of the harvest each week throughout the season. CSA subscribers know exactly where their food comes from and often develop a loyalty to "their farmer." Vegetable farmers get an infusion of cash at the beginning of the growing season, when they most need it to purchase seeds and supplies. Many CSAs have expanded the menu of options to offer shares of berries and fruit, eggs or flowers, as well as meat shares.

In contrast, the multi-farm CSA minimizes the risks to producers and members by gathering produce from several local farms, which increases the variety, and assures that there will be plenty of produce every week throughout the season. This new kind of CSA model will support more than one local farm and provide a greater variety of fresh fruits and vegetables.



There are advantages to sharing the work and sharing the risk ... once a solid group of farms has formed, the possibilities... are limitless. Networks of small and medium-sized farms, whether farmer-, consumer-, or organizer instigated, can become the backbone of a sustainable local economy. —Elizabeth Henderson, Sharing the Harvest





Multi-farm CSA entrepreneurs are finding innovative ways to market their CSA packages. Some farmers are outsourcing products (e.g. bread, eggs, and butter) directly into the customer share. Others are using these products as addons into the normal share (e.g. members additionally enroll in a weekly share of a loaf of bread and a dozen eggs). Still others are providing share options based upon themes of products (e.g. bread and butter share, vegan share, and the omnivore share).

While the benefits of connecting with other farms and local business are compelling, it is important to remember that these relationships require extra effort and commitment from all the partners, Unless well managed, these partnerships can be overwhelming for farmers who are already too busy.



Potential Benefits to the Multi-Farm CSA

- Combines the most attractive aspects of CSA (pre-payment, guaranteed market, direct link to customers, and control over pricing) with the unique advantages of partnering with other farms or growers.
- Allows for a more manageable and profitable enterprise by spreading the burdens and risks associated with raising crops among several growers.
- Focused crop production
- Low risk participation for small and new growers by allowing them to participate with minimal risk. Growers can agree to grow crops and amounts of crops that they are comfortable with and match their abilities
- Enhanced community building among growers
- Sense of security and potentially of market preservation during hard times
- Each grower can grow as many crops as desired without the responsibility for growing all the crops and successive plantings; this responsibility is shared with other growers.

Three General Types of Multi-Farm CSA Arrangements:

- 1) Supplemental farms: A single-farm CSA farm with supplemental share options or available products from other local farms.
- 2) Multi-farm CSA: Growers are networked to supply a CSA-like ordering, distribution and seasonal food support system.
- 3) Cooperative CSA: Growers for a legal cooperative to work out growing, quality control and marketing structures, usually with staff to handle non-farming duties.





Healthy, Safe Food

CSAs, farmers markets, and local food co-ops are among the best ways to acquire healthy, safe food. CSA membership is a guarantee to receive the freshest, highest quality foods. Such is the reciprocal benefit of committing to the grower before the growing season: The grower then is committed to providing members with the choicest share of the harvest. Another aspect of food safety is that members can seek out farms and growers whose growing practices (e.g., sustainable, organic, biodynamic, etc.) they support.