

Forward

Over the last twenty years, there has been a remarkable increase in local alternatives to the dominant food system. Many farmers and their non-farming neighbors have come to recognize the social, economic, environmental, and nutritional flaws in this industrial, long-distance system and the value of direct interaction. Consumer cooperatives, farmers markets, u-picks and CSAs are all strategies to bring farmers and eaters closer together.

While each of these strategies has merit, CSA is perhaps the most creative and holistic. Indeed, its rapid growth seems to support this. In the late 1980's the number of CSAs nationally could be counted on one hand. Today it is approaching 2000, more by some estimates. In Michigan alone, CSAs have increased over 600% in recent years, from nine in 1998 to 60 in 2007. So, what is CSA and how does it differ from other forms of direct marketing?

At its heart, CSA revolves around a meaningful relationship involving a farmer, a set of farm members and a piece of farmland. This relationship tends to be annual or seasonal rather than weekly or occasional. The farmer agrees to raise a diversity of fruit, vegetables, flowers, and/or animal products in an environmentally sound (and transparent) manner and share the production with members, usually on a weekly basis. Members receive a "market basket" of fresh produce rather than individually selected items. In exchange, members agree *before* the season begins to invest in the farming operation, supporting the farmer as well as his/her production methods. In addition, members recognize that natural systems are never fully predictable or controllable – that drought and flea beetles happen – and they are willing to accept some of the risk of farming along with the farmer. Thus, the farmer-member relationship is not solely an economic

one but hinges on mutual awareness, shared philosophy, and trust. These elements are often reinforced through opportunities to visit and work on the farm. Some CSAs even *require* that members participate in the labor, the decision-making, even the ownership of the farming operation.

Because CSAs reflect and depend on living and working environment, they are contextual – no two are alike. They are designed to suit a place, its soils, demographics, history, and culture(s). As a result, relationships cannot be superficial or absolute but need to be continually negotiated and renegotiated.

It would be easy to replicate CSAs if they depended on rules and formulae. But why would we want to do this? Prescriptions and mechanical efficiencies characterize the industrial system that we are trying to reform (if not eliminate). CSAs move us away from the McDonaldization of ourselves, our food, and our earth. Still, hoeing against urban sprawl, like swimming upstream, is difficult and challenging work. We need guidelines, resources, and experienced

advice to help us along the way.

This manual has been created for just that reason. Its purpose is to assist new and prospective CSA farmers by providing some basic "nuts and bolts" of CSA management without losing sight of the fact that each CSA has its own unique personality and set of demands. The guidelines and recommendations in this manual are the result of years of trial and error. Experienced CSA farmers and advocates are sharing these insights in the hope that you will be successful and that your success, in turn, will help us all grow and strengthen the CSA movement, throughout Michigan and across the nation.

Laura B. DeLind
Michigan State University
Winter, 2007



Original artwork by
Laura B. DeLind

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This **CSA Training Manual** is a production of CSA-MI, 3480 Potter Rd, Bear Lake, MI 49614.

Individual copies \$16 includes s/h and CD with crop planning and budgeting software
5 or more: \$12 each, includes s/h More than 20 copies, please call.

PDF files of the manual are available at
<http://csafarms.org/csaresources.asp>

A Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) grant supported the production of this document.

The following people provided writing, editorial and/or review services for this project:

- Lee Arboreal, Eater's Guild Farm
- Laura B DeLind, MSU
- Rebecca Graff, Fair Share Farm
- Jim Sluyter and Jo Meller, Five Springs Farm
- Jenny Tutlis, Meadowlark Farm
- Mike and Phyllis Wells, Wells Family Farm
- Sandee Ware, Ware Farm
- William Willging, Performance Solutions
- Theresa Williams, Pond House Farm
- Crop Planning Software on the CD was developed by and is offered courtesy of the Michigan State University Student Farm CSA (with modifications by Jim Sluyter). CSA Budgeting software is from McGill University, by Sacha Sabih and Laurie Baker.

Original Graphics: Jo Meller, Martha West, Jay Tatara

Layout and design: Jim Sluyter

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Introduction to the CSA Farm

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) is both a marketing strategy and a philosophy. The farmer sells shares in the next season's produce, usually before the season begins. Each week of the season, the shareholder will receive a "share" of fresh produce from the farm. In some CSAs, the shareholders are involved in decision-making of all aspects of the operation; in others the farmer makes all the decisions. Each CSA is unique to the farmer and the community that is served. Shareholders may pick up their boxes at the farm, at delivery sites, or home delivery may be offered. CSA comes in many forms; see Appendix A for more discussion of styles and definitions. For more on the philosophical underpinnings of CSA, refer back to the Forward or, for much more detail read *Farms of Tomorrow Revisited* (listed in Resources, Appendix C).

Benefits

- Farmer receives money before the season starts for seed, inputs, supplies, etc.
- Farmer can market in the off-season to recruit new members.
- Farmer is able to concentrate on production during the season.
- Relationship with shareholders is at least one season long, and may extend for years.
- Farm members share the financial risks of farming.

Challenges

- Crop production - as many as 30 or more different crops must be grown to provide diversity to shareholders throughout the season.
- Labor availability - crops are continually being planted, harvested, cleaned, sorted, and packed.
- Location - if the location of the farm is near enough to the customers, on-farm pickup is the least burdensome for the farmer; otherwise, delivery sites must be established.
- Shareholder retention - too much, too little or too many unfamiliar items will cause shareholders to drop out.

Resources Needed

- Experience growing large quantities of many different vegetables.
- Small amount of land is OK if intensive production is used.
- Ability to manage the crops, harvest, pack, and deliver.
- Greenhouse is useful to be able to start seedlings or extend the season.

Statistics of CSAs across the US

- 20-30 shares per acre is possible.
- 30 shares per farmer or laborer is possible (that is pushing it, though).
- To earn a full-time income 80-100 shares may be necessary.
- The share price ranges from \$300-\$800 per share/yr (\$15-\$40 per share/week).

Tips

- Start small - 5-25 shareholders if experienced at growing, otherwise grow a couple of years for farmers' markets and keep good records of production.
- Diversify marketing, especially at first, selling excess to farmers' markets, restaurants, or on-farm.
- Involve shareholders with farm events, work-shares, etc. to increase shareholder retention.
- Publish a newsletter each week to put in the shareholders' box. Include what is happening on the farm, a list of what is in the box, recipes. Use it to educate shareholders to seasonal eating, sustainable principles, and unfamiliar produce.
- Don't under-price the shares - this is the biggest reason for farmer burnout.

Adapted from <http://www.georgiaorganics.org/markettool/>