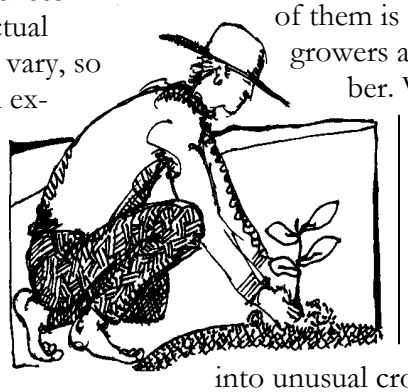
Chapter Four: Planting for the CSA

How much to plant are questions every CSA grower must grapple with. Your cropping plans are the heart of the CSA operation and the complexity of growing a large variety of crops and having them produce on time for your shareholders is a challenge.

If you are new to CSA farming, it is best to start small and over the years add more shares until you reach a comfortable level. This will depend on the time you want to spend, whether you hire any help, energy level, and amount of land. As a general guideline, one acre of land will supply vegetables for 20-30 shares.

For estimates on production per unit of land, look at the "Growing Information" tables in Johnny's seed catalogs or in the references listed in the resources section. The actual production you get on your farm will vary, so you will have to depend on your own experience. Keeping good records will help you learn your own yields and make it easier each year to plant the right amounts. There is cropping software on the CD that may be helpful.



How Much to Plant?

How much to plant for each share depends on several things, some of which are listed below.

- How much would *you* want to receive each week and for how many weeks. Consider that you may eat very differently — that is more veggies — than many of your farm members.
- Share size. The CSA share is often set up for a family. Some growers provide for 2 people. Many offer a variety of share sizes.
- Variety. The more different veggies that are in the basket each week, the fewer of each you might decide to give out.
- Popularity. Some crops, like eggplant or kohlrabi, are not widely liked and you will want to give out less. Others, like tomatoes, are very popular and you will need more.
- Plan for crop failures/production problems. Plant extra, especially at first, as much as 20% or more, to cover losses.
- Other markets. If you have ways of selling extra produce (such as a farmers market), then over-planting is not a problem.
- *Beware of giving out too much. People hate to waste food and this is the surest way to lose members.* Remember, your members probably eat differently than you do – almost no one eats veggies like a veggie grower!

What to Plant-Selection

Choosing the vegetables you will grow for your members can be a fun process. It is best to start with what you like to grow and eat. Twen*t*y different vegetables with several varieties for many of them is a good starting point. Many growers are offering twice that number. We have found that people often prefer everyday crops, like green beans, carrots, potatoes, tomatoes, and broccoli. Many farm members like the *idea* of trying new things, so later you can branch into unusual crops, like bulb fennel, basil, kale, and shallots, and educate both yourself and your members about new food.

- Grow from your own strengths. What vegetables do you already do well?
- Make sure you are offering enough variety each week to keep people interested.
- Grow what your land is good for. Carrots like a sandy loam for instance, but tomatoes need more nutrients. If you have enough land, grow corn and pumpkins, but if you are small with raised beds, you could specialize in herbs.
- Climate. Choose varieties that are recommended for your area (seed catalogs can help) and get into riskier things later.
- Stick with annual vegetables (and fruits) first, and add perennials later (such as asparagus, rhubarb, strawberries).
- If you have no greenhouse or other means

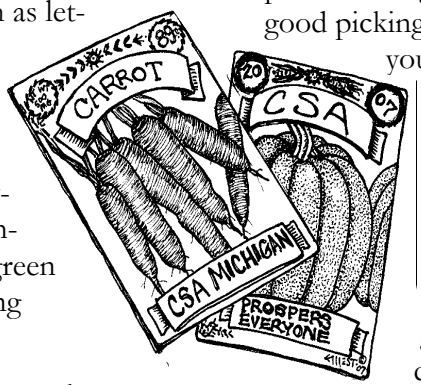
of growing transplants, use mostly direct seeded crops. Look for a good source of transplants, only buying the ones you really need. It can be hard to buy organic or favorite varieties of transplants. In most climates, long-season tender crops must be grown from starts, so if you can't find what you want, try growing them under lights.

When to Plant and Succession Planting

Growing for a season-long harvest is one of the hardest parts of CSA farming. You want to supply your farm members with as much variety as possible for all season. Many crops, like lettuce, greens, and beans, need to be planted repeatedly and it is no fun to run out of something or have big gaps between harvests because you did not plant often enough. So do your homework , decide what to plant and how much, ask other CSA farmers for advice, then make a schedule and stick to it. (See chart).

Many things go into making a planting schedule and your own will always be a work in progress. Here are some factors to keep in mind.

- How cold is it in *spring*? If you start your distribution too early, it can be hard to have anything ready, especially if you don't have a greenhouse. Likewise, don't plant too early because some crops grow very fast in spring and may ripen too soon, such as lettuce, spinach and greens. Warm weather crops planted too early will bunch together at harvest time with later plantings, leaving you with too much. Examples include cucumbers and green beans. Know your likely spring frost dates.



- How hot is it in *summer*? Some cool weather crops, like spinach, grow poorly in summer and with others, like lettuce, you may need to switch to heat tolerant summer varieties. Shade cloth and other protection can help.

- How soon does it turn cold and dark in *fall*? Anticipating the fall slow down is a tough thing to learn. Don't pay attention to days to maturity given in seed catalogs when making later plantings. Lush spring crops, like lettuce, will be slow and weak in fall. Plantings will spread out leaving gaps in harvests. So to keep a steady supply to your members for the fall, you must plant more often and sooner than you did in the spring, allowing more days for maturing in the fall. Anticipate this in early August.

- Amount of produce needed. One way of planting more of something is to plant smaller amounts more often. For fast growing crops, this helps you avoid having too many ripen all at once.

- To do more of your planting all at once, use varieties that have different maturation dates, such as early and late sweet corn. Invariably, some of these varieties will do better than others, and you may find yourself staggering the plantings of just your favorites.

- Picking/harvest time. If picking something like green beans or peas is a time consuming chore, it goes faster if there is plenty of it to pick. Planting more often ensures you of good picking and you can sell the surplus if you like.

- Disease and insects. Make additional plantings of certain crops as a hedge against future problems. For example, zucchini can be picked all season. But it often goes down from powdery mildew and squash bugs. A second planting done a month later will give you continuous harvest.

Sticking to a planting schedule throughout the hectic days of summer is a daunting task. Many important jobs will be pulling you so it helps to make your planting as efficient as possible. Some tips include:

- Put your schedule on a large calendar where you will see it often.
- Have everything ready (tools, water, seeds, etc.) ahead of time.
- Don't be caught running out of seeds. It is frustrating and time consuming to try to find them and they may not be easily available during the growing season.
- Know where each planting of each crop will go on your farm map before the season begins. You probably will make changes as the season goes on. Mark these in immediately so you are not caught later. Make sure the map is accurate at the end of the season so your records are true.
- Do as much soil prep before planting day as possible.
- Some growers like to set aside the same day of every week as planting day, and do all the tilling, seeding and transplanting for *the week* on that day.

A good rule to remember is to take care of what you already have first. In other words, don't lose crops you have already invested time and land into because you are spending too much time planting new crops.

Make sure to document your successes and problems for use next year. Planting schedules are particularly useful as you develop your successions and planting times.

If you are new to growing, practice for two years before making the commitment to the challenge of CSA farming, and then start small (say, 20% of your projected total membership). Remember, your shareholders are sharing the risks of crop failure brought on by the weather, not your learning curve.

On the next page is a cropping plan excerpted from the Michigan State University Student Farm crop planning software (on the CD included with this manual). You will find goals for the number of weeks each crop would be available, and how much they hope to give each share per week (based on a family of 4). You can customize all of these figures to fit your goals. Using yield information that you can customize to your situation, the software will calculate the bed feet (or row feet) needed to achieve these goals or you can crunch the numbers on paper. The succession plan that MSU uses is part of the software, as well as planting and maturity dates. Other planting guide charts in Appendix E •

This chart offers some examples of succession cropping that you can use as a *guideline*

Plant Once	**Plant Two or Three Times**	**Plant every 10-14 Days**
Tomatoes	Broccoli, Cabbage	Beans (bush)
Potatoes	Carrots	Lettuce
Peppers	Corn	Salad mix
Eggplant	Cucumbers	
Leeks	Melons	
Onions	Radishes (spring plantings, fall plantings)	
Shallots	Beets	
Sweet Potatoes	Br Sprouts	
Beans (Pole)	Scallions	
Winter Squash	Summer Squash	

Crop	# wks	Amount/ wk	unit	Total Amount/ yr	Yield/ bed-ft	bed-ft needed
Arugula, early	3	0.5	lb	15	4.5	3
Beans, bush 1	2	1	lb	20	1.2	17
Beans, bush 2	2	1	lb	20	1.2	17
Beets, late/storage	12	2	lb	240	3	80
Br. sprouts	6	2	lb	120	1.2	100
Broccoli, early	10	1	hd	100	1.34	75
Broccoli, late	10	1	hd	100	1.34	75
Cabb, early	3	1	hd	30	1.34	22
Cabb, late	10	1	hd	100	1.34	75
Carrots, early	10	2	lb	200	4.5	44
Carrots, late/storage	29	2.25	lb	652.5	4.5	145
Cauliflower, late	6	1	hd	60	1.005	60
Chard, early	8	2	lb	160	0.75	75
Chard, late *cut for salad first	8	2	lb	160	0.75	100
Chin Cabb, early	2	1	hd	20	1.005	20
Corn, sweet 1 (2 var)	2	12	ea	240	1.95	123
Corn, sweet 2 (2 var)	2	12	ea	240	1.5	160
Cucumber, early	4	2	lb	80	0.9	300
Cucumber, mid	4	2	lb	80	0.9	300
Eggplant	8	1	lb	80	1	80
Kale, early	8	2	lb	160	1.125	142
Kohlrabi, late	4	3	ea	120	4.5	27
Leeks	19	2	ea	380	6	63
Lettuce, early	6	2	hd	120	3	40
Lettuce, late	8	2	hd	160	4.5	36
Melons, late	6	1	ea	60	0.75	80
Onion, storage	33	3	ea	990	6	165
Peas	4	0.5	lb	20	0.15	133
Peppers, sweet	10	2	lb	200	0.75	360
Peppers, hot	6	0.25	lb	15	0.375	100
Potato	25	2.25		562.5	1.5	375
Radish, Daikon	4	1	lb	40	2.25	18
Radish, early	6	1	bu	60	4.5	13
Radish, late	6	1	bu	60	4.5	13
Spinach, early	4	1	lb	40	1.2	33
Squash, sum, early	3	1.6	lb	48	1.5	32
Squash, sum, mid	3	1.6	lb	48	1.5	32
Squash, sum, late	3	1.6	lb	48	1.5	32
Squash, win, grp3 B-Nut, Acorn	8	5	lb	400	1.5	267
Squash, win, grp4 Delicata	3	5	lb	150	1.5	100
Tomato, main	10	4	lb	400	1.125	680