

## Chapter Five: Distribution

**H**ow will your farm members get their produce? This is one of the basic decisions that a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) farmer must make - and perhaps revise or refine over time. With no two farm situations exactly alike it is no surprise that there are plenty of variations around a few main themes for getting your farm's crops onto your farm members' plates. Many crops need to be picked at least twice a week. The 'CSA-only' farm will probably need two or more distributions per week.

### At the Farm

Distribution at the farm is often the simplest option and it offers members the closest connection to the land. Shareholders simply come to the farm to pick-up their produce.

Some considerations are:

- Driveway needs to be in good condition with enough parking available.
- Traffic patterns for in-coming and out-going vehicles.
- Liability: check with your insurance agent about people coming onto the farm.
- Need to keep the pickup area safe and attractive.
- Shelter with good light and ventilation is desirable, with enough room to accommodate your pick-up style.
- Option of pre-bagged/boxed or offered "buffet" style –see below.
- It is best to set specific day and time.
- Allows for u-pick of some veggies, such as high-labor items (beans, for example).

### Off the Farm—Delivery

Most farmers who deliver have a centrally located site(s) where members can pick up their share. A local farmer's market is often used but other sites to consider are churches, coops, health food stores, members' porches. Things to consider are:

- Avoids all issues of visitors to the farm.
- Brings the farm share closer to the shareholders.
- Requires a vehicle large enough to haul all the shares; may require refrigerator truck if delivery is long in time and/or distance.
- Requires time, the farmer's or hired person's, to pack the truck and to drive to and from sites.

A few growers deliver door-to-door. This is the most effort for the grower, the most convenience (and least involvement) for members.

Some farms do both. Nearby members can come to the farm, and delivery is arranged to others who live further away.

To *bag or not* is another consideration of distribution

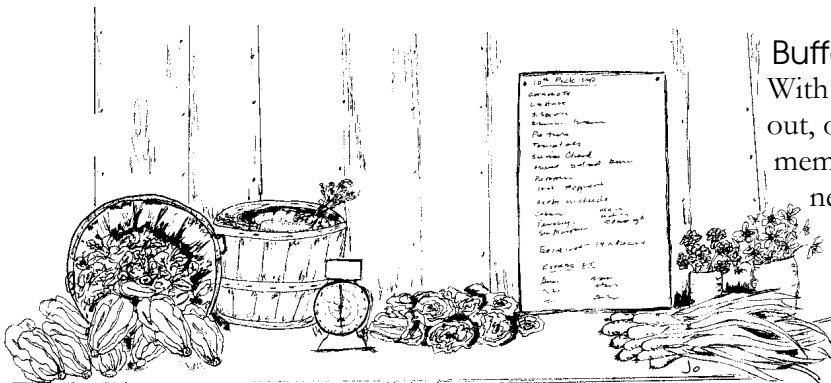
### Pre-bagged or boxed

- Simple, fast and convenient for the shareholder.
- More work for the farmer to bag everyone's share.
- Little or no choice in shareholder selection.
- Easy to deal with shortfalls, farmer can use a 'mix or match' system.

### Buffet-style

With this option, you are laying produce out, on tables or in baskets, for members to choose. Usually you will need a way to tell people how much to take for their share (blackboard or signs on baskets, for example).

- Members have choice in selections and amount (up to a



maximum).

- Use a swap table when veggies start or are slowing down. (see side bar)
- May need a scale, roll of bags or other containers conveniently located.
- Can become a celebration and a great exchange of ideas and recipes.
- Requires a suitable distribution site (large enough, light, pleasant).
- Hours of pick-up can be limited so that members can meet each other.
- Buffet style is easier to set up at the farm, but can be used in delivery settings.
- Can be time-consuming for the grower: members often want to interact with the farmer.

Some farms have buffet style for on-farm pickup, but may pre-bag for delivery.

#### When you run short

There are times, no matter what your distribution setup, that there is not enough of some items for every share. This is often a problem as a crop is just starting to come into the harvest, or as a crop tapers off in production.

When we set up a **'mix and match'** table at Five Springs Farm it was an instant success. It solved our occasional supply problem and and at the same time turned out to be popular with our members. Now we sometimes add veggies that are not particularly popular with our group to the mix so that those who really like them can get more, and those who do not can select something else. Here is how it works: we add up the number of items (cabbages, bags of beans or whatever) and divide by the number coming that day. People can take that many items, their choice, from the table. Now our members look forward to the time that we start doing 'mix and match.'

There are other ways to handle the problem of too little for all. At a CSA conference I overheard a discussion on the topic, and one farmer suggested cutting big cabbages in two ("How many people really want the whole thing?" he asked rhetorically). Roxbury Farm in New York may offer any combination of five zucchinis or cucumbers and any combination of fifteen tomatoes, peppers or eggplant. Or offer a choice between broccoli and cauliflower. You can offer even broader groupings. A variety of root crops, for example, can be offered as "4 pounds, any combination."

#### When they don't show up

Whether you deliver or invite members to the farm, there will be missed pickups. Pick up times might be a focal point of your farm operation but your members have other priorities. They forget. They go on vacation and don't tell you. Emergencies great and small interfere. Your first response may be anger, but don't take it personally, it happens to all of us. There are plenty of options.

- Most farmers give their shareholders another chance. Set up a routine so that the frequently late member can find their share.
- The farmer or distribution host can call to remind members, especially in the early weeks of the season.
- Some farms make the "failure to pick-up" part of the agreement. If a member does not pick up, then their share for that week is given away, often to food banks in the area. Some growers give the share away at the end of pickup time; others might offer a 'grace' period - but this would require storing the share for that time.
- Some farms give the 'missed' share away as a sample to a prospective member or to employees.
- Encourage vacationing members to send a friend or family member for their share. These are often new members next year.

#### Summary

There are as many different styles of distribution as there are farmers. We recommend choosing a style that would work most easily for you in the beginning, as you may be short of time. Keep yourself happy and prosperous, but also keep the shareholders happy so they come back to you year after year.

Pick-up time either at the farm or at a delivery site should be an efficient but fun experience. This is a time for members to

interact with each other and the farmer. It's nice to have a comfortable place for people to sit and chat, perhaps garden paths to wander on or just a cool spot to go to in the heat of the day. The decision to start a CSA is a decision to work with people; your skill at making people comfortable is an important one.

### Choice

We decided to introduce some choice after two members were in our shed picking up their pre-bagged share. Looking in her bag one said, "Beets again...they go straight to the compost bin." The second exclaimed, "You could probably not grow enough beets to tire me of them." It was a perfect example of what many other farmers have realized: people like to have some choice, and people don't necessarily like everything you grow. We introduced a "buffet style" pickup late that season and asked our members what they thought. They were overwhelmingly in favor. Now the produce is laid out with advice on how much each share can take (as a maximum).

Patricia Mumme (Garden Patch Produce in Ohio) bags things up for the last couple of people who come to her pickup. "A lone bag of beans or eggplant looks pretty sad by itself," she suggests.

### Swap Table

A 'swap table' is a place for people to put things that they don't care for in their share, and pick up the leavings of others. Sounds like a good solution to the problem of differences in people's tastes. But our experience with it at Five Springs Farm was not encouraging, and we are not alone in that opinion. Maybe people just generally don't want to mix things up in front of the grower.

## Bag, Box or Basket

There is no 'standard' in the way Community Supported Agriculture growers distribute their produce. Nor what they distribute their produce *in*. Some use bags (paper grocery bags or other kinds) or boxes (made of paper or wood). Baskets are popular with some.

The decision is partly aesthetic, partly economic, and often impacted by the scale of the operation and the method of distribution. For example, bushel baskets don't stack up if there is a truck full of deliveries to be made.

### Paper or Plastic?

Bags are easy to find, cheap and convenient. Members can save bags from the grocery store, or you can buy new ones readily. Canvas totes or other reusable bags cost more but make sense environmentally.

### The down side:

- If there is any moisture on the produce, paper bags can fail. Line with a plastic bag if this is a problem
- A large share, or a heavy one can be a too



much for paper bags or smaller totes.

- Most canvas totes are not big enough. See resources for some that are. One grower has reported using pillow cases — a member found a huge bundle at a yard sale.

### Boxed In

Many growers choose the strength of boxes. Waxed produce boxes will hold up to multiple uses, and hold plenty of produce. They stack up well in a truck for delivery and are easy to handle. Smith & Smith Farms in Dayton, NV uses attractive custom made 1/2 bushel wood boxes.

### The down side:

- You need two boxes per member, plus a

few more since members do not always bring their box back.

- More expensive, especially wood.

## The Case for Baskets

When I think of baskets, I think of bushel or ½ bushel round baskets. These are popular with some growers. The spectrum, though, runs from custom made wooden baskets to plastic laundry baskets from the Dollar Store (“yes \$1 each,” says the farmer).

The down side:

- Round shape is a problem for deliveries.
- Like boxes, they do not always come back to the grower, and can be more expensive than some other options (well, not those from the Dollar Store).

## Resources

**Reusable Bags** can be found in more types, styles and options than you would imagine

- CU, Inc, 151 Walton St, Portland, ME 04103, 207-878-1212: big, strong bags, synthetic materials.
- Clean Green Bag Company, [www.cleangreenbags.com](http://www.cleangreenbags.com): Fabric Shopping Bags, 12" x 9" x 11"
- [www.reusablebags.com](http://www.reusablebags.com): wide variety of bags and totes in nylon, hemp and cotton.
- GreenSak, Gilbert, AZ 85296, 480.507.2138, <http://shop.greensak.com>: very inexpensive totes, indeterminate size
- The Bag Connection, Inc., 459 SW 9th Street, Dundee, OR 97115, 800-622-2448, <http://www.bagitsystem.com>: variety of poly bags and totes
- Dick Blick Art Materials, (800) 933-2542, P.O. Box 1267, Galesburg, IL 61402-1267, <http://www.dickblick.com/zz032/53/> “Fold-n-Hold” cube-shaped canvas totes
- Eat Local Food, 637 Emmons Blvd, Wyandotte, MI 48192, 734.341.7028, [www.eatlocalfood.com](http://www.eatlocalfood.com): very beautiful cotton bags in various sizes. Can customize with your name and logo.
- Les Mains Réveuses, <http://www.mainsreveuses.com>: Canadian company with pretty and functional fabric totes. One of the vendors listed is Équiterre (bags with logo), [www.equiterre.qc.org](http://www.equiterre.qc.org)

## Boxes

Wood Box Factory, 23961 Road T2 SW, Mattawa, WA 99349, 509-932-6420,  
<http://www.merchantcircle.com/business/Wood.Box.Factory.509-932-6420>

## Baskets

Texas Basket Company, Inc., P.O. Box 1110, Jacksonville, TX 75766, 800.657.2200,  
<http://www.texasbasket.com/>

## Bags, Boxes, Baskets and More

Both of these companies offer a wide variety of packaging solutions and other products for the market grower.

- Monte Package Company, PO Box 126, Riverside, MI 49084-0126, ph: 269.849.1722,  
[www.montepkg.com](http://www.montepkg.com) (also with facilities in Florida)
- Hubert Company, U.S. 1-800-543-7374, Canada 1-888-835-7929, <http://www.hubert.com/>