

Chapter 3



Finding People to Join Your CSA

*I hope some day you'll join us,
And the world will be as one.*

—John Lennon

You've found land to farm in your urban neighborhood, and now you need to find other people to join you in the work of growing food locally—and enjoying the produce you'll harvest. The time is right. The local food movement is growing quickly and people are enthusiastic about growing their own food.

The enthusiasm of your core group is the best place to start when it comes to recruiting members. You all know people who are interested in local food—or being more self-sustaining—helping the environment—or simply improving the neighborhood. After you get a few more enthusiastic people involved, things will start moving, as those people tell even more people about the new venture.

MEMBER RECRUITMENT

Set a specific number of shares you know you can handle the first year. Don't grow too big too fast; starting small and growing gradually will allow you to iron out the wrinkles in the CSA setup as you go. Also, take the time to get your membership information organized before



Let people know what they can expect to receive in a weekly CSA share and you'll find your produce speaks for itself (PHOTO: ERUEV)

you start recruiting seriously. It's great to get a few people on board early, especially if they are people who will be involved in the planning and organization of the CSA, but get a few simple marketing tools together early on so you can answer questions from prospective members sensibly and completely.

Start with a simple brochure that explains what you are doing, gives the location, share sizes and prices, and contact information to find out more. You definitely need a phone number that someone will answer—or return messages from—and a simple way for people to contact you online. At first that may be an email address, and maybe a Facebook page or a page on a community website, but eventually you may want to create a website for the CSA that you can direct prospects to so they can get more information. But first you need to find enough people to make your CSA successful and self-sustaining, and the best way to do it is by word of mouth.

What Motivates People to Join a CSA?

You need to know where to look for people and know what to offer them to make them want to join. So you need to think about the motivating factors that will convince people that membership in an urban CSA is for them.

The first step is thinking about why you are interested in urban farming:

- ▶ **To eat better.** This can mean healthier eating, but it also can mean having food that tastes better because it is fresher. You'll try new foods and will find some that you like a lot.
- ▶ **To become part of the local food movement.** People are tired of having only a few choices in varieties of common produce—Iceberg or leaf lettuce? Red Delicious apples or Granny Smiths? A CSA can introduce people to different varieties of familiar food, too.
- ▶ **To avoid processed and genetically modified food.** Much food that travels long distances is highly processed using preservatives to keep it stable until it is sold. And we've all read stories about experiments with "Frankenfood" involving genetic modification to produce longer-lasting, less perishable produce. This kind of long-distance food gives up a lot of taste to make it transportable (just think of a cottony tasting tomato bought at a supermarket in January), and you may not want all those chemicals in your food.
- ▶ **To help the environment.** If a lot of food is grown in your own neighborhood, you will immediately reduce your carbon footprint substantially. It's estimated that the average American meal "travels" 1500 miles to get to your plate. Locally grown food doesn't require so much fossil fuel use, and less fossil fuel also means less CO₂ emissions.

DIG DEEPER



How far does your food travel before you eat it? Find out more about the loneliness of the long-distance produce at <http://www.cuesa.org/page/how-far-does-your-food-travel-get-your-plate>.

Research indicates that most people who join a CSA think that their eating habits will change drastically, and they are ready and willing to accept that change. That kind of thinking may be unrealistic, however. People get set in their ways, and changing in a major way—having someone else, essentially, decide most of what you are going to eat for five or six months a year—is a big commitment.

Many people quickly become accustomed to picking up their weekly share and discovering new kinds of produce, new varieties of vegetables, however. They find recipes that they love and they can't wait until

kale—or bok choy or daikon—is in the share again. They tell friends and family about how great it is to eat local, seasonal, tasty, and healthy food that they have helped grow.

But there are always exceptions. Some statistics indicate that a CSA is likely to lose 10 to 40 percent of their members at the end of the season. For some, learning how to cook new things is just too much work. When it's high harvest time and shares are rolling in produce, it can be overwhelming to figure out what to do with ten cucumbers or a dozen squash.

There are other reasons why people leaving a CSA. Some move away, have increased demands on their lives, or feel as if they live too far from the CSA to participate fully. Other people may find that they don't actually cook as much as they thought or hoped they would, and some may not have expected to get so many unfamiliar foods. It's important to offer the right balance of familiar items and new or unusual produce to keep people who need a little encouragement to move outside their comfort zone when it comes to eating. In most organizations, one should anticipate a 30% loss of membership per year, and a CSA is no exception to this rule of thumb.

WHAT'S THE BUZZ



Direct potential members to a short film, “Community Supported Agriculture: What to Expect When You Join a Farm,” available on YouTube. Although it is geared more toward joining a traditional, farmer-owned rural CSA, it will give people an idea of what is involved.

How to Find People to Participate

There are a lot of ways to recruit new members. Remember, you are a local urban farm project, so most of your members will come from nearby. Get the word out in your community. Encourage new members to tell their friends about the CSA. You might even consider having a promotion, such as 5% off the cost of a share or five free work hours for every new member whom an established member brings into the group.

There are plenty of other ways to let people know about the new urban farm, too:

- ▶ Talk to someone at the local paper about writing an article on what you are doing. The article may not appear in print, but most newspapers have a website for local stories, and you can direct people to the article online.
- ▶ Get that brochure put together, print some copies at the local print shop on a brightly colored paper, and distribute them wherever you can—schools, libraries, churches, community groups, bus stops, and if you can, on the bulletin board of your local supermarket.
- ▶ If people ask you about the CSA, give them two brochures—an extra one for a friend.
- ▶ Get listed on the locavore websites in your area. In Cincinnati, the Central Ohio River Valley (CORV) food guide lists local farms and CSAs in an annual directory; they also have a website with the information. Make sure you are in any directory like this you can find.
- ▶ Give presentations to civic groups and community organizations to let people know about your urban farm. Your community council, Kiwanis club, or other organization will be happy to give you 15 minutes or a half hour to tell their group about what you are doing because what you are doing is going to help the community. Put together a simple PowerPoint if you can, or make a display board to bring along, and take those brochures with you, too.
- ▶ Talk to a local radio show or your community access cable television show about coming on as a guest to talk to the show's host about what you are doing. Be sure to have an email address, telephone number, or simple website address you can give out for more information.

ENRIGHT RIDGE

COMMUNITY SUPPORTED AGRICULTURE

LOCALLY GROWN PRODUCE MAY THROUGH NOVEMBER!

Join the only urban CSA in Cincinnati

Work to grow your own produce

Become a locavore this summer



Details and application at
www.enright-csa.org

Find us on Facebook



A simple flyer or brochure you can distribute around your neighborhood can direct potential members to find current information about your CSA online

- ▶ Visit any businesses that have offices in your area and ask to put brochures in their common room, put a notice in their company newsletter, or hang a sign on their bulletin board. People who work in the neighborhood can get involved through their workplace.
- ▶ Have brochures with you when you go to a local farmer's market or even out to eat at a neighborhood restaurant. Ask if you can leave a few brochures on the front counter at the restaurant and pass one on to anyone you strike up a conversation with at the farmer's market.

SETTING SHARE SIZES AND PRICES

You have to give people an idea of how much produce they are going to receive, and you need to set a price for the share. Members are going to want value for their contributions (both monetary and work hours), but you also want to be careful that you don't overwhelm them with too much food. If half the share winds up on the compost pile at a member's house every week, it's not the right size.

Determining Share Size

Things to consider when you are determining share size include:

- ▶ How long is the growing season? How many weeks of the year will people receive a share?
- ▶ Do you have a greenhouse or hoop house to start crops early and to allow for succession planting in the same beds?
- ▶ What kind of storage area do you have for things that can be stored for awhile after they are harvested (onions, potatoes, and garlic, for example)?

- ▶ Do you have cold storage for more perishable produce?
- ▶ Do you want to have one standard size, or does it make more sense to offer two or three different sizes to attract families as well as couples or single people?
- ▶ How will you handle members who “share a share”?

At Enright CSA, we have offered two different size shares, which we have called by various names. At first we had full and half shares, then we changed the names to large and regular shares. In both cases, the larger one fed four (4) or more people a week and the smaller size provided enough produce for two or three (2–3) people a week. And we encourage people to find other folks to share a share, if that is what works for them. But we have learned that it’s best to make the members responsible for the logistics of sharing—they decide how to divide the cost and work hours among themselves, and most important, they either come together to pick up their produce, or one person picks up the entire share and distributes produce to the other members. It just doesn’t work to have various people show up to get their part of a share when it might include one pumpkin or a handful of basil, things that can’t be divided very well.

CSAs generally provide produce—vegetables, greens, sometimes fruits or nuts. But many CSAs also offer other items in shares, including eggs, dairy, meat, bread, honey, and even flowers. Offering these kinds of items can add another level of complexity to the CSA operation, so we recommend you start with produce and then decide how you want to grow and expand in succeeding seasons.

Setting a Price

How do you determine the price for a share in your urban CSA? It’s difficult to do because there are so many variables. But consider some advice from the University of California Cooperative Extension: Setting the share price too low is “the biggest contributing factor to CSA burnout and failure.” On the other hand, you know your community and have a good idea of what the market will bear. You don’t want to price yourself out of contention, either.

The best place to start is with your budget. Determine likely expenses, including seeds, equipment, staff salaries (at least a farmer, and possibly assistant farmers and a farm manager or CSA coordinator), land costs, water costs, and other expenses. It’s important to include all the costs involved. This includes fair wages for labor as well as hidden or indirect expenses such as insurance, repairs and maintenance, capital improvements, and taxes, if applicable.

Then, take the total amount and divide it by the number of shares you expect to have for the CSA. That will give you the per-share price. If you are going to have different levels of membership, use a method to determine the prices for different size shares that makes sense. Try to keep it simple for figuring prices.

County extension offices may be able to provide budget examples that will help you itemize all the costs of urban farming, and there is a sample CSA budget in Appendix A, p. 102. You should also look at comparable CSA farms in your region to see what they charge for a share. In southwest Ohio, the CORV Food Guide (<http://www.eatlocalcorv.org/>) lists information about CSA share prices, and you can find listings for other regions online.

As a general estimate, current CSA shares in the Midwest range from about \$300 to \$700 per share for a season, depending on the location, the type of CSA, and the size of the share. It’s important to make sure

WHAT'S THE BUZZ



A simple equation for figuring out what to set as the price for a CSA share:

$$\text{EXPENSES} / \text{NUMBER OF SHARES} = \text{SHARE PRICE}$$

shareholders pay enough to cover all the costs of the food they receive, and it is equally important that they believe they are getting a good value in belonging to a CSA. Finding the balance there—and also considering intangibles such as “goodwill,” the knowledge that members are supporting local and environmentally sustainable food production and contributing to the health of their community in many ways—will help you determine the cost of a share.

When you evaluate the share price for your CSA, use these criteria:

- ▶ You are happy with the price you have set.
- ▶ Members are happy with the price and the size of the share they receive.
- ▶ You have met your membership goal for the season; that is, you have sold all your shares.
- ▶ Your costs have been covered.
- ▶ Your farmer and paid staff members have received a fair wage for their labor.

If you have met all (or most) of these criteria, your share cost is appropriate. Of course, even if you have met these criteria one season, changing prices and markets will demand you re-evaluate share prices before the beginning of each succeeding season.

CO-OP HOURS, ALL-WORK SHARES, AND NONWORK SHARES

A co-op urban farm project keeps the costs associated with farming lower by depending on volunteer hours from shareholders to take care of many tasks involved with running the CSA. This involves another kind of bookkeeping—figuring out how many hours of work are required for each share. Some cooperative CSAs are run by the farmer, who coordinates members with work shares to do much of the administrative work.

At the Enright Ridge CSA, most of our members work a set number of hours in addition to paying for their share. Currently we require 40 hours of work over the course of the 26-week season (with some work hours available pre-and post-season) for a full share, and 20 hours of work for a half share. Shareholders keep track of the hours they work on preprinted forms (in Appendix A, p. 103) that we keep in a binder at the greenhouse. Work is divided into teams, and team leaders let people know when there are tasks to be done.

We have work directly related to farming—everything from making soil mixes and transplanting young plants to watering, weeding, bed preparation, and harvesting. We have a compost team that works all year round to provide us with soil amendment for our gar-



There is work for everyone on the urban farm, including keeping up with turning the compost piles
(PHOTO: NANCY SULLIVAN)

dens, and during growing season we have a whole team set up to handle distribution of shares on Saturday mornings.

We also need people to do a lot of work associated with running the business side of the CSA, such as accounting, communications, fundraising, and grant writing, and we have people who organize social events and who know about plumbing, carpentry, and glazing, to help maintain our greenhouse.

There's work for everybody, but not everybody works. We have some nonwork shares, which cost more. We encourage people to work—there are even a few “all-work” shares that require more than 100 hours of labor—but we understand that there are people who prefer to pay instead of work. We're happy to welcome them, too, though we limit both the number of nonwork shares and all-work shares.

It may seem like a difficult task to juggle all these different kinds of work shares, but so far it has been manageable for us. We have come up with a pretty good system—we set the price of a work hour at \$5. Therefore, if you want a nonwork share for a share size that normally requires 40 hours of work, you'll be paying an extra \$200 for your share. So far, this has worked for us.

We've also used this system when people do not fulfill their work hours. Most people do, and many work more than their allotted hours, but sometimes members wind up a little short on hours. They are billed for hours not worked at \$5 per hour, and the CSA gets some extra income at the end of the season.

The thing to remember is that every farm and every CSA is different. These are guidelines you can use when setting your share price and work hours, but you will have to tailor your price and work requirements to *your* CSA and *your* members.

WHAT'S THE BUZZ



You may find that you want to set the “hourly wage” that you use to calculate nonwork shares and hours owed at a higher rate than \$5. Keep in mind “what the traffic will bear” in your community when setting share prices and calculating the worth of volunteer hours. It's a balancing act; you don't want to undervalue the work of members, nor make the nonwork prohibitively expensive.

RETAINING MEMBERS

You will have to resign yourself to the fact that some members come and go, staying only a season or two, but you want to make sure that most of your members keep coming back year after year. Every aspect of an urban CSA affects member retention—problems with share produce, work hours, other members or the staff—all these things can mean the difference between someone staying for another season or calling it quits.

Of course, there are other reasons why people leave. People move, they start their own gardens (or their own CSAs!), or they just rethink their priorities. They may have thought they were going to spend evenings cooking delicious meals of home-grown produce and weekends freezing and canning the extra vegetables, but when they find that the produce is turning brown before they can get to it, they start to think twice about belonging to the CSA.

Losing 10 to 20% of your membership each year is not unusual. If you find that your turnover is closer to 50%, try to find out what is causing so many people to leave. It doesn't hurt to ask people who aren't coming back why they've decided not to return; maybe you can even convince some of those folks to stay if they know something is going to change.

One good way to retain members is to ask at the end of one season for a commitment for the following season. You can offer a discounted rate for early deposits to encourage people to sign up.

Stay Connected

Stay connected with your members. A CSA is a co-operative venture, and when people come back year after year, it is because they feel they are a part of something special—they have made a connection to the CSA. Make members feel appreciated, and make it as easy as possible for them to stay involved. Make sure they know about work opportunities and social events, and find out what they like and don't like about how the CSA is run. You can do this with a member surveys that asks what the CSA is doing right—and what can be improved.

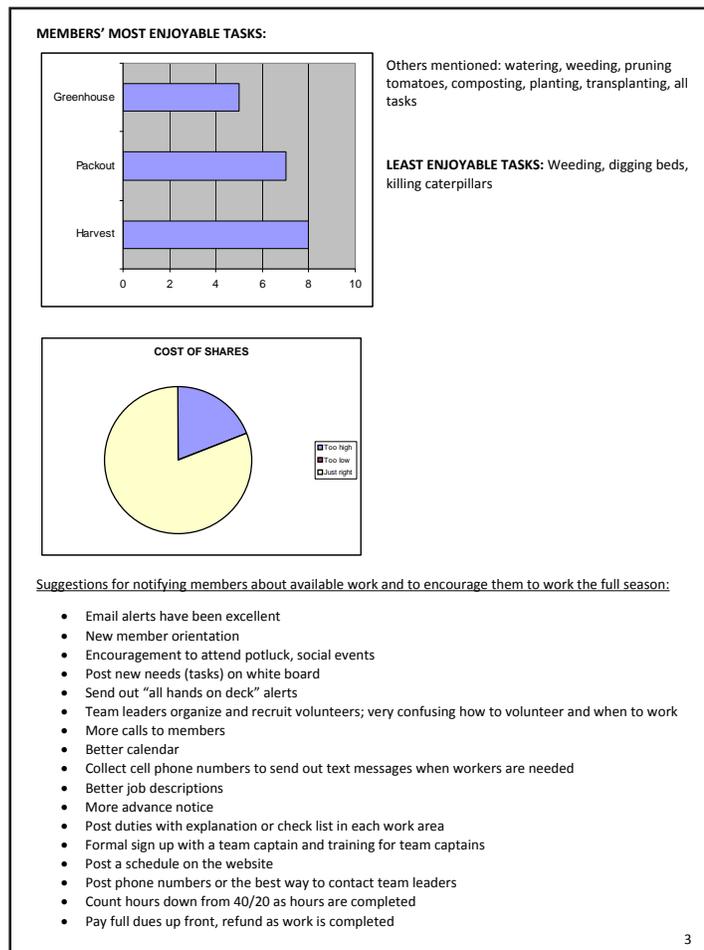
END-OF-SEASON SURVEYS

At the end of each season, we've distributed surveys to our members and asked them questions that help us get an idea of how the CSA is succeeding. Ask members about:

- ▶ The produce they liked best, and what they liked least
- ▶ If their expectations were met, and if not, how they were not met
- ▶ The most enjoyable tasks at the CSA, and the tasks they liked least
- ▶ How the pickup/distribution of shares worked for them
- ▶ If they got enough—and not too much—communication from the CSA about what was going on
- ▶ Whether or not they liked the social events associated with the farm
- ▶ What else they'd like to see at the CSA—other products or events or a different way of doing things
- ▶ Any additional comments they might have about the season just past

Here are a few other suggestions we've gleaned from looking at other people's surveys. First, keep it short. People are busy, and they aren't going to want to spend a lot of time on this. Ask the least number of questions you can to reasonably get the information you need, and make it easy and quick for members to respond.

Provide a range when possible. That is, instead of Yes/No responses to questions about what they thought of the variety, amount, cost, and other variables at your CSA, ask them to rate the particular issue on a scale



Results of a survey of CSA members to find out what they liked about the season and what they think could be improved

of 1 to 5. This can give you some good information. Be sure to provide guidance for the scale—that is, label it clearly with “Agree” and “Disagree” or “Satisfied” and “Dissatisfied” or even “Excellent” and “Poor” to indicate what the ends of the scale mean.

And finally, keep it relevant. Ask for members’ attitudes about things that can change. If you can’t grow fruit, don’t ask people what kind of fruit they’d like to see in the share. On the other hand, if you are thinking about changing pickup locations, ask members what locations would be most satisfying to them. You want information about things you *can* change and ways you *can* do better. Don’t disappoint people by asking them about things you can’t change.

We have gotten a decent response to the surveys we distribute—almost all of our members took a paper copy of the survey or printed a copy from a link sent by email, and 70 percent of the surveys were returned. Volunteers tabulate the survey answers to make the information useful to the membership as a whole as well as to the core committee as they steer the CSA toward a new season. We published the results as a short document that is accessible from the News page of our website.

DIG DEEPER



You can access the complete results of the Enright Ridge CSA survey by clicking *Enright CSA Survey Results at <http://www.enright-csa.org/newsletter.html>.*

MARKETING YOUR CSA

If you have members who have some experience in marketing, ask them to think about ways to get the word out about the CSA to attract new members and retain the members you have. This is an especially good job for the off season, when you are not busy growing vegetables.

Doing a little marketing in the off season has a twofold benefit—first, you may encourage people to look you up and join the CSA. You also may find that getting the word out about your urban CSA inspires other groups to try urban farming. It never hurts to get a little good publicity.

If your community has a weekly paper, send them a prewritten article (with a photograph) about your farm project, and there’s a good chance they’ll publish it. Most community papers depend on readers for a lot of their content these days. The daily paper in your city or town—or a local radio or television station—may also be interested in publishing an article about your CSA, perhaps in a special green living section or at the right time of year, when gardens are “in the news,” usually at planting time in the spring or traditional harvest time in the fall.

We’ve found that alternative press outlets, such as weekly arts papers and magazines devoted to topics such as urban living or culinary pursuits, have shown an interest in what we are doing. We’ve had nice articles in several of these magazines, and one article leads to another. That’s true about all publicity—the more you get, the more interest there is.

Not too long ago, we were approached by the Cincinnati Contemporary Art Center to be a part of an art project that involved having an artist build a custom-made bike cart for our CSA. Not only did we get a great tool for our gardens, but we also garnered quite a lot of publicity when the bike cart was finished and delivered. Then, it became part of an exhibit on art and farming at the museum, and that reaped even more publicity.

We’ve also participated in conferences, tastings, seminars, and classes that gather people who are working on various kinds of agricultural projects and urban and community farming in particular, networking and making connections that have helped our CSA grow. Cincinnati’s Civic Garden Center, for example, has a “Taste of Local Gardens” event every September, where urban farms share what they’ve grown.



This bike cart, used to haul tools to the garden plots and produce back to the greenhouse, was custom built for the Enright CSA by a Danish artist, through the Cincinnati Contemporary Arts Center, which sponsored an exhibit of art on the farm, and the bike cart and exhibit both got some publicity for our urban farm project

A FEW FINAL THOUGHTS

You want to find and keep people involved in your CSA. One way to help people feel welcome is to ask established members to pair with new members so each one has one person they can ask about problems or concerns and who can introduce them to staff, team leaders, and other members. Having someone you know to go with you will encourage new members to attend work sessions and social events, too.

Finally, consistently meeting member expectations is the best way to keep them coming back. If there is always plenty of variety and your produce is high quality, make sure it stays that way. Keep your pickup time and place consistent, and set work schedules and keep to them. Have regularly scheduled events and let people know about them in advance. With a CSA, the less surprises, the better—give your members what they want and they'll keep coming back. ■