

Chapter 6



Distributing Your Produce

*We learn from our gardens to deal with
the most urgent question of the time:
How much is enough?
—Wendell Berry*

After you have planted your crops, cared for them, and harvested the produce, there is still one more step in the process of urban farming: You must get what you have grown to your members. When you make your distribution plan, keep your options open, because you may find that you need to refine the plan after you see it in action.

You need to find a place and set a schedule for picking up shares, and you should set up a procedure and make sure members are aware of it—and that they are aware of the consequences of not following the procedure.

ORGANIZING A PICKUP PLACE AND SCHEDULE

There are many ways you can set up distribution; every farm should find the method that works best for their own situation. Make it as well-organized as you can manage with the resources you have, and try to find the quickest way to get the produce to your members—the least time required for the farm staff and volunteers, so they can concentrate their time on farming, and the most efficient setup for members picking up their shares.



Pickup day for your CSA should be well-organized and convenient for volunteers and staff who are setting things up for distribution as well as for members who are coming to get their shares of the produce

Finding a Location

A location close to or at the place you are farming is best, because you don't have to move the crops a long distance after harvest. You need some kind of protected space with room for storage and room for pickup. The Enright CSA uses an old florist shop attached to our greenhouse for distribution, and it is an ideal situation—it is near our gardens and it has a walk-in cooler for storage, running water to clean vegetables, and a large space to set up the food in baskets and bins.

But there are alternatives in your own community, too. You may find a church or school that has a cooler (or a basement room) where you can store produce for a day or two, and you can distribute shares from a space in a public building, a hoop house, a garden shed, or a member's garage or porch. You could even distribute shares from picnic tables set up under pop-up canopies if necessary.

Whatever your location, keep in mind that it needs to be safe and convenient for your members. Some things to consider when you are choosing a distribution site include:

- ▶ Check traffic patterns for vehicles coming and going, and parking for people while they are picking up their shares. If your members all come from a nearby area, you may be able to convince some of them to come to pickup on foot or by bicycle, but many people will still come by car, so you need to plan for that.

- ▶ Provide some kind of shelter with adequate light and ventilation, and with tables or shelves to hold the produce, whether it is pre-packed for members or arrayed for them to pack up themselves.
- ▶ Keep liability issues in mind—make sure you have insurance coverage for any injuries or accidents that might happen during pickup at your site.
- ▶ Set up the pickup area so it looks appealing and keep it as clean as possible.
- ▶ Make sure your members get the information they need at pickup about what they are getting, how much they are getting, and even suggestions about what to do with the produce. Distribute a weekly newsletter or use signs and bulletin boards to keep members well informed.

Setting a Schedule

Our CSA has a share pickup once a week during the six-month growing season and members pick up their produce on Saturday mornings. This works well for us, but if you have a lot of members or your crops are not all likely to ripen at the same time, you might set up a staggered schedule, with some members coming on Wednesday and some on Saturday, for example. Other CSAs are set up so that only half the members pick up each week.

Your schedule will be determined to an extent by your pickup location and your members' schedules. If most of your shareholders work during the week, having pickup on a Thursday morning is not going to make sense. And if you are using a church hall for distribution, you are not going to want to set your pickup time for Sunday mornings. The important thing when setting the schedule is to make it convenient for both the workers and the members; remember, you want to keep your members happy so they'll return the next season, and if pickup is always a drag, they may think twice about continuing to belong to the CSA.

Pickup is a great time to create good feelings about your urban farm. People who stop in to get their shares at the Enright CSA also take time to see what is growing in the gardens out back and to talk to fellow members. A lot of recipes are exchanged during pickup, and we encourage socializing by sometimes having baked goods and tea or coffee, with music playing at background level. The binder we use to track work hours is always available during pickup hours so people can keep their forms up to date, and there are usually posters and flyers about upcoming community events on the greenhouse's walls and windows. It's a convivial atmosphere that allows people to linger and talk if they want to, but we have enough space that the socializing usually doesn't get in the way of the business of pickup.

Box or Buffet?

How will your members get their produce? You'll have to decide if it's best to have pre-packed shares ready or let people put together their own shares. The majority of CSAs box up everything a member receives at pickup and has shares ready and waiting. That's not how we do it, however. Our pickup procedure has been to have a packout team with members who arrive early on Saturday morning to get the produce ready by counting or weighing what has been harvested, washing it as necessary, and then displaying it on tables in the distribution area, creating a kind of buffet where people pack their own shares into bags they bring with them each week. Each kind of produce has a sign indicating how much members should take for their shares.

WHAT'S THE BUZZ



If you use boxes (or some other kind of containers) to pack shares in advance, you need to have at least two containers per share—one will be at the member's house and the other at the distribution site. And you have to depend on the members to bring back their empty boxes every week.

Boxed Shares

The benefits of pre-packed shares are:

- ▶ It's easy to make sure everyone gets their fair share, even if there are shortages of some produce. Workers can use a mix-and-match system to deal with shortfalls.
- ▶ It's the simplest and quickest method for members, who just have to pick up their box and go.

Drawbacks for this method include:

- ▶ There is little or no choice for the members in what they get or don't get; this may cause waste in the long run.
- ▶ It's more trouble and takes more time to pack up everyone's share in advance.

Pack It Yourself

For the buffet style, the benefits are:

- ▶ There is more member choice (to a point) in what to take or not take.
- ▶ It's easier and quicker for workers to set out large bins of produce.
- ▶ No need to provide boxes or baskets; members bring their own bags.
- ▶ It provides more opportunity for members to meet and talk about how to prepare the produce.

Some of the drawbacks include:

- ▶ You need enough space to set out all the produce and have room for members to walk through and pick out their share, as well as room for people who want to stay and chat.
- ▶ There's a need for supplies such as rubber bands and small plastic bags for loose items and scales for produce that is divided up by weight.
- ▶ It takes longer for a member to come and pack up a share than to just pick up a box.

We use two shifts of packout workers for distribution. The first team works from 8:00 am to 10:30 am, getting the produce set out and determining how much each member will get. They display the produce in bins and baskets and make the signs that clip onto the containers with clothespins. We also have a large whiteboard where all the items in the week's share are listed so people can quickly and easily see what they are getting. The first shift begins the cleanup by tidying up the area where they work.

The second shift of workers comes at 10:00 am and stays until about 12:30 pm.



The whiteboard at right lists the items in the weekly share and how much of each type of produce is included in each share

They are there to interact with the members as they come in, and they make sure each member checks his/her name off the pickup list so we know who has (or hasn't) picked up a share. They also answer questions, provide bags as needed, help people with the scales, and generally act as the farm's goodwill ambassadors to the members. After noon, when pickup is officially ended, they pack up any leftover produce for storage in the cooler, mop the floor, and clean the tables, so the distribution area is ready for the next week.

One other responsibility of the second shift is to pack up shares for people who have let us know in advance that they won't be able to make the pickup time. This is a service we decided to offer; people often leave their own bags at the greenhouse with a note, or else they email the packout team leader by the night before pickup. Packed shares are put in the cooler for members to pick up later on Saturday or during the day on Sunday. On Monday morning, any shares that have not been picked up are disposed of. This system can be abused by thoughtless people, but for the most part, it has worked for us.

Delivery

Some CSAs provide delivery of shares, either to a few centrally located pickup sites or directly to members. This is certainly convenient for members, but it is probably not an efficient way for you to distribute your produce. If your urban farm is small, direct delivery to members might work, but it adds effort, and unless you have a fleet of bicycle carts, it also adds a lot to the farm's carbon footprint.

The point of an urban farm is to grow food in areas where people already are living and working, so no one should have too far to travel to pick up shares at a distribution site. We don't recommend offering delivery unless there are some extenuating circumstances. For example, if there are disabled or very elderly people in the neighborhood who are interested in participating, arrangements could be made for a member who lives nearby to deliver their produce to them. But for standard distribution, delivery probably doesn't make sense.

WHAT'S THE BUZZ



We always seem to have leftover produce at the end of pickup. We have sold leftover produce at a farmers' market and also have arranged to donate some of it to a food pantry. We have also experimented with selling excess produce to the public from our greenhouse, setting up a kind of farmstand.



Beets and carrots are bundled for easier distribution of equal shares

WHAT'S IN A SHARE?

How do you know how much each member gets in their share, either to pack it up in advance or to let people know how much of each item to take from the produce buffet? This is where your math skills get a workout. You have to calculate how much you have of each item and divide it by the number of shares. This is easier with cabbages and squash than with beans and basil, obviously. Our packout members count vegetables like ears of corn, bunches of

lettuce, turnips, and beets. We weigh tomatoes, beans, and herbs, setting the scale to discount the weight of the container these items are in.

Then it's just a matter of basic division (you might want to have a calculator handy at the distribution site, but it's also likely that every worker's phone has a calculator app). If you have 100 pounds of tomatoes, and you have 42 members, then every share will include a little less than 2½ pounds of tomatoes.

Label Your Produce

Now you know how much of each item everyone can take, but members are not necessarily going to know what every item is. There are, for example, a seemingly endless variety of greens, and people want to know if they are getting collards or kale or vitamin greens. They may never have heard of celeriac or yukina, so it's a good idea to clearly label the produce with the name of the item as well as how much to take. We try to put a list of expected harvest in our weekly newsletter, which we send out by email the day before pickup, and there is often an article about one of the vegetables in our newsletter or on our blog. These are all ways to keep members happy and coming back for more. If they know what they have and how to cook it, they will find they are getting greater value from their shares.

The Share Table

Every week at the Enright Ridge CSA greenhouse during pickup, you will hear the following kinds of conversations:

"Kale! Great, we haven't had that in months and it's my favorite."

"Really? You couldn't pay me to eat kale. If I take it, that will go straight to the compost bin."

"More cucumbers? I still have six from last week, what am I going to do with those?"

"Oh, I'd take all the cucumbers I can get. I make pickles for the whole family!"

And so on. That's where the share table comes in handy. If there is something in the share you don't want, leave it on the table for someone who will use it. And you are welcome to take what you can use in addition to your regular share.

We also put produce that is just starting to come in or beginning to taper off on the share table if there is not enough to give every member some. We have great farmers and amazing production processes, so we rarely have

WHAT'S THE BUZZ



The share table is a good way to eliminate waste on both ends, at the farm and in members' kitchens.



The share table lets people leave what they won't use so other folks can make good use of it

too little produce and have not had to set limits on the share table. However, if you have limited quantities, you can use the share table to even things out. Add up the number of items you have on the table (bags of beans, bunches of carrots, heads of cabbage) and divide it by the number of members in your CSA. Then hang a sign that tells people how many items they can take from the share table that week.

GAP AND GHP STANDARDS FOR PRODUCE

An urban CSA has the same responsibility as any restaurant, farmers' market, or green grocer to provide safe, fresh food. Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) and Good Handling Practices (GHP) focus on best agricultural practices to make sure that fruits and vegetables are produced, packed, handled, and stored in the safest manner possible to minimize risks of microbial food safety hazards.

There are food-handling classes available at many community colleges. These are often geared more toward restaurant workers, but the basics of food safety apply to any situation. You will also find that there are efforts made by government agencies and university extension programs to inform farmers of current safe agricultural practices. The Ohio State University's Fruit and Vegetable Safety Team offer a GAP education program, with workshops held in locations around the state.



The production and packout team members need to be aware of basic food safety procedures; GAP and GHP manuals and classes are available through The Ohio State University extension program

DIG DEEPER

Visit <http://producesafety.osu.edu/> for more information about OSU's GAP workshops.

GAP and GHP standards involve several categories of possible contaminants: chemical (e.g., pesticides and additives); biological (e.g., animal or human pathogens); and physical (e.g., foreign objects). The areas that have potential for contaminating the produce include water (everything from irrigation to flooding to washing the harvested produce); soil amendments (compost, manure, or anything else added to the soil to improve its biology or add nutrients for the growing plants); handling practices (farm workers who harvest, wash, store, weigh, and pack the food); and traceability (not a source of pathogens, but the method that allows the source of an illness to be determined).



Safe food handling procedures start in the garden and continue into the distribution area, where workers must know how to clean and store the produce properly

There are many other elements to safe food handling, including storing produce at appropriate temperatures and in proper conditions; soil testing; appropriate plumbing and wastewater handling; risk assessment; keeping animals out of the fields and/or storage facilities. It's a lot to take in, but it's important for you to learn what you can about safe agricultural and food-handling practices from the start of your urban farm. There are many online sources of information where you can find best practices, and it is a good idea to have someone from your CSA take a GAP workshop or other food safety class early in the planning process for your organization.

CSA POLICY FOR PICKUP AND NON-PICKUP

You've set a pickup schedule, have a clean, well-lighted distribution spot, and keep your members informed of what's being harvested and when to pick up their shares. And yet some folks still don't show up to get their produce. How do you handle this? The best way to deal with missed pickups is to set a policy right from the beginning and stick with it.

Sometimes emergencies crop up; other times people go on vacation and completely forget about pickup day. There are also other concerns, such as people who always come right at the end—or after—pickup time, or who make arrangements to pick up their produce at a different time again and again and again, taking advantage of CSA workers and staff.

Depending on your circumstances, you may be able to accommodate people who come late or on another day, or you may not. The best way to approach it is to try to put as much of the responsibility on the members as possible. With our ubiquitous cell phones, a member can always call a friend or family member to make the pickup at the last minute.

That can cause its own problems, because the friend will not be familiar with the routine, though we do ask members to inform whoever is picking up for them how pickup protocol works. We have also found that having workers to assist newcomers can pay off; if their experience is good, you may have a potential new CSA member.

Remind people about pickup times in your communications, and if you have a chronically late member, try to make it clear that you have volunteers manning the distribution location, and they want to go home and get on with their Saturday (or Tuesday evening or whenever), rather than waiting around for latecomers. Set some basic policies about late and missed pickups and stick to them as much as possible. Following are a few examples of pickup policies we have established at the Enright Ridge CSA:

CSA PICKUP POLICY

- ▶ It is the responsibility of each member to pick up his/her weekly distribution of produce at the designated site and time. If you arrive late, your share may not be available for that week.
- ▶ Members agree to follow the instructions of the packout crew in collecting the quantity/amount and variety of produce included in the share each week.
- ▶ If a member is unable to pick up his/her share during a vacation or for any other reason, there are several alternative arrangements possible:
 - ▶ Designate another person to pick up the share (making sure that the person is aware of pickup times and protocol).
 - ▶ Alert the packout coordinator by e-mail by a set time that you want your share packed up and placed in the cooler for retrieval later.
 - ▶ Let the packout coordinator know via e-mail by a set time that you will not be picking up a share so it can be added into the shares for other members.

There are many different ways to set up distribution. The main thing to remember is not to make it any more complicated than it needs to be. Keep it simple and efficient, and it will be a good experience for your members—as well as not too much of a burden for your workers. Pickup is the time when members can interact with each other and find out what's going on at the farm. Make it a fun and pleasant experience. That's one of the best ways to keep everyone in your urban CSA happy and satisfied. ■

WHAT'S THE BUZZ



Late pickup service (leaving pre-packed shares in a cooler for people who can't make the regular pickup time) is only possible if you have a public or open area where the produce is safe but available to members without requiring CSA staff in attendance.

