

# Chapter 8



## *Beyond the Farm: CSA Odds and Ends*

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*Practice yourself, in little things,  
and then proceed to greater.*

*—Epictetus*

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**W**e have covered many aspects involved with starting an urban CSA in the previous chapters, but there are a few subjects that don't quite fit with any of the chapter topics. This final chapter includes information about a few additional topics that you may find useful as you start farming in the city. These topics include working cooperatively with other farms and retail outlets in your area, the pros and cons of organic certification, questions your members may have and CSA policies you should let them know about, and selecting and using CSA management software. The chapter ends with a look at how an urban CSA can be more than just a source of fresh, local, healthy food—it can also help your community become a better place to live, in both tangible and intangible ways.

### **WORKING WITH OTHER FARMS**

There are two related reasons to work with other farms or farm markets: the first is to increase the variety of produce you have for members and the second is to find an outlet to sell or barter your surplus crops. Mixed markets—selling produce outside your CSA shares—can add stability and income to your urban farm, and many CSAs take advantage of other outlets to sell excess produce. First, however, let's talk about buying and selling or bartering with other farms to increase variety.

A transaction like this could be very simple—you have ten bushels of beans and you only need six bushels to give your members each a reasonable amount of beans in their share. The orchard on the outskirts of town has harvested its apples, but counts on other farms around the area to supply different produce for

their farm stand. You can work out a deal to get a few bushels of apples in exchange for your excess green beans, and everyone is happy.

There are a thousand permutations to this scenario—bartering, even trades, selling in weeks when you have excess and using the income to buy from other farms in weeks when you need to diversify or add to your own crops for the shares. You could set up a farm stand yourself to sell to customers outside your CSA base when you have more beans (or tomatoes or peppers) than members can use. Or you can enlist members to take the surplus to your local farmers' market and sell it there.

Having too much is a good problem, and one you should have at times since your farmer will probably grow a little more of most items in order to guarantee enough for each pickup. Investigate the possibilities for selling your excess produce—seek out other growers near your location, scout farmers' markets, and try to determine the demand for fresh, locally grown produce outside your CSA members to see if it makes sense to forge some alliances or set up a network that will allow you to manage surpluses and deficits by working with other sellers and growers nearby.

One way to ensure that you have enough and a variety of produce for your CSA is to see if there are any nearby farms that might have fields that can be gleaned of food left in the fields. If the farmer is agreeable, CSA members or staff could arrange to go through the fields and gather this food for distribution at the next pickup.

There is another aspect of working with other farms—to offer your members items that you don't produce. The products could range from meat and dairy to fresh eggs, honey, and other items. You may want to offer some items as part of a regular share, provide them for people who are interested in ordering items in advance, or just having some products available for people to purchase when they come to pick up weekly shares.

Again, you are adding to the work of managing the CSA, but it could well be worth the added work if it keeps members coming back and helps make the project solvent. If you use CSA management software, you can set it up to allow members to buy extra items outside of the standard share, and this can make the process more manageable. It's probably a good idea to gauge interest from your members before embarking on an ambitious program of adding extra items for sale, but if the interest is there and the products are high quality and a good value, it's another way your CSA can retain members, by providing what they want. Remember to add a little to the cost you pay for the items to cover the expenses involved in procuring and providing the items and to cover any that are not purchased; you don't want to lose money by offering these items to members.



*Making connections with other farms and farmers in your area can help you set up a network to allow you to manage surpluses and deficits more efficiently (PHOTO: NANCY SULLIVAN)*



*If your CSA grows more than you need for member shares, you could set up a farmstand to sell directly to the public or talk to restaurants and other retail outlets about supplying them with fresh produce*

## SELLING AT OTHER OUTLETS

Mixing markets adds a level of complexity to your operation. You have to decide if the potential income that comes from selling at other outlets is worth that added complexity. Many things will enter into the decision, including the availability of farmers' markets or wholesale outlets for what you have to sell. You also have to consider your members—especially if you are a co-operative farm, keeping the members satisfied with what they receive in their shares and in return for their work at the farm is the most important objective.

But if you find there is a demand for something you can grow, it's a way to increase income and keep your share prices reasonable. We have found local restaurants who were interested in purchasing surplus produce when we have a bumper crop of an item. We've also talked to chefs about supplying locally grown items that we might not necessarily grow for members but which we could make room for as a cash crop. An example is a Vietnamese restaurant that was looking for a local source of cilantro and lemongrass; growing these herbs in a small amount of space and providing them to the restaurant regularly could provide extra income and help balance the books.

Some possibilities for other markets for produce include both retail, such as an on-site farm stand, a vegetable wagon that travels around the neighborhood, or a nearby farmers' market; and wholesale, including food co-ops, other CSAs, chefs/restaurants, and schools or institutions. There are logistics involved beyond actually growing the crops: you will need people available to staff the farm stand, vegetable wagon, or farmers' market booth; for wholesale, this would also entail invoicing, collecting, and delivering the products.

Selling to other markets is an opportunity to expand your sales and increase your income, but you need to balance that with the added work to decide if this is right for your urban farm.

# ORGANIC CERTIFICATION

Most CSAs, including the Enright Ridge CSA, use organic methods to grow their crops. However, we are not certified organic, and there are many other CSAs out there that grow organically without official certification. The main reason why many CSA farms are not certified organic is that it is an expensive and time-consuming process. If you grow at multiple locations, it could become unreasonably costly to have every garden or field certified organic.

The term “organic” is now legally defined and can be used only when describing produce grown in accordance with USDA rules and certified organic by an independent certification agency. Do you need to have your urban CSA certified organic? Maybe not—if your members know and trust the farmer, and work on the crops themselves, they will probably be satisfied that organic practices are being used. But don’t call your farm “organic” in advertising or promotions if it is not certified.

There are reasons to get certified, especially if you plan to sell your produce to other markets. If you sell at a farmers’ market, you may command a higher price for items that are certified organic. And if you plan to sell to restaurants or other retail outlets, they may demand certified organic products.

## POLICY STATEMENT

You need a written document that sets out the policies established for your CSA regarding payment, pickup, work, and any other aspects of the urban farm that need to be clearly set out. A co-operative CSA is an agreement among members and the farm staff to do what is required of them, in a timely fashion, according to some established expectations. Some things you want to cover in your policy statement include the following statements, revised as necessary to reflect the specific situations of your CSA:

1. I understand that I am supporting local food production and sharing in the harvest.
2. I understand and accept the risks involved with agriculture and how this can affect the yield and variety of produce in shares, and I agree to share in the bounty and loss of the season.
3. I agree to make payment for my share on time and in full as scheduled.
4. I understand that there are no refunds after the first pickup of the season.
5. I agree to fulfill the farm work hour commitment I have made by selecting a specific type of share, and I understand that I am responsible for keeping track of the hours I work.
6. I understand that I am responsible for taking care of CSA tools used in performing work, returning them when finished.
7. I agree to keep my membership contact information up to date.
8. I agree that it is my responsibility to pick up my weekly distribution of produce at the designated site and time.
9. I understand that if I am unable to pick up my CSA share during a vacation or for any other reason, I must make arrangements for someone else to pick it up or let the packout team know I will not be getting a share that week.
10. I agree to read all communications from the farm.

You may want to include more information about payments, and you will probably have other items to add to your policy statement, but this gives you a good outline to get started.

# FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

There are certain things that new or potential members need to know about the CSA, and you will find that many of the same questions come up again and again. It's worth your while to construct a list of frequently asked questions and answers to provide to people. This can be a short list in your promotional brochure or a longer list on your website. Following are a few of the questions we are often asked, with answers to each one.

## ***What is a CSA?***

CSA is an abbreviation for "Community Supported Agriculture." Most CSAs are created by forming a contract between a farmer and a group of people who pay in advance for the crops he or she grows, sharing the risk and the bounty. All members of the CSA pay for their shares and/or commit to a certain number of work hours.

## ***What do I owe for my share, and how do I make a payment?***

Check the website to see a list of the costs of different size shares with different work hour amounts. We ask for a deposit with your application, so if you have paid your deposit, subtract that from the amount for the share you have selected and either mail a check for the balance, or bring it to the greenhouse during packout.

## ***Where and when do we get produce?***

The Enright Ridge CSA provides produce to members for six months of the year, from May through October. Shares are distributed every Saturday morning during growing season and can be picked up at the distribution location.

## ***How do I know what we'll be getting in the weekly share?***

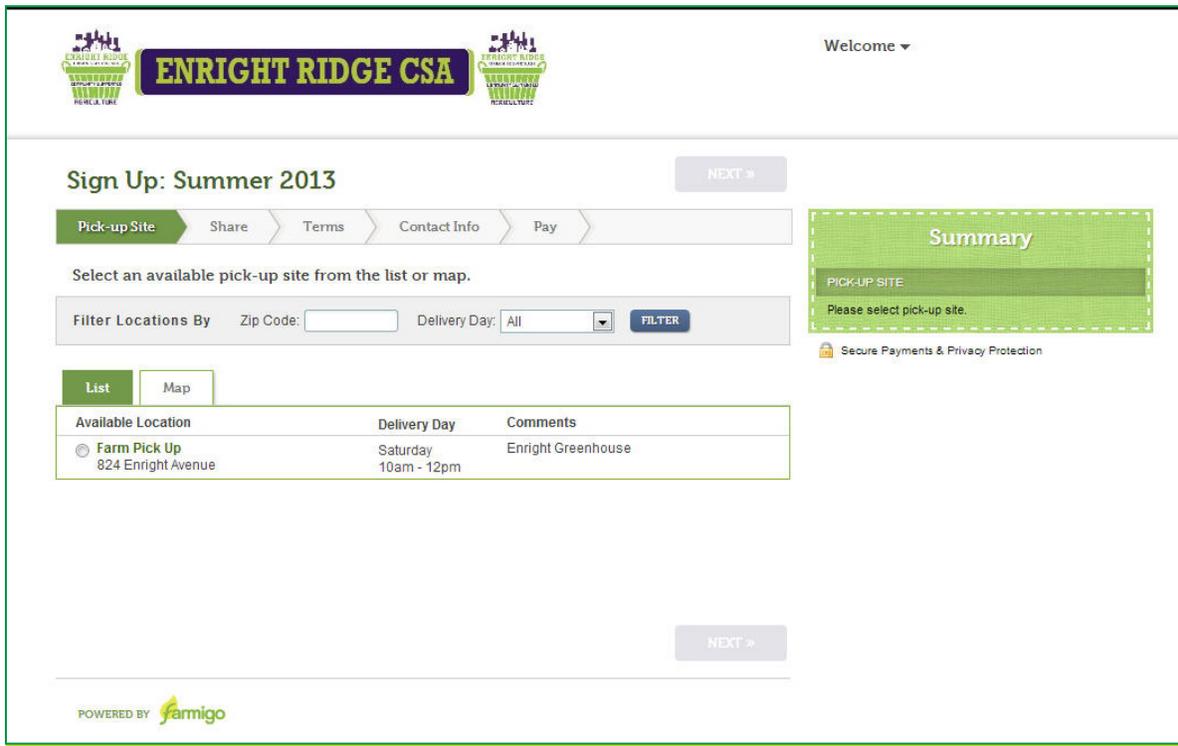
We post a newsletter every week with what we think will be ready for distribution on Saturday, but these items can change. The packout team also labels the items for pickup, so you can make a list while you are at the greenhouse if you are unfamiliar with any of the produce.

## ***What happens if I forget to pick up my share?***

If you forget to pick up your share and haven't contacted the packout team to pack it up for later pickup, well, you just don't get a share that week. Since we are a co-op with limited personnel, it isn't possible to have people available for share distribution outside of regular hours.

## ***What if I can't make it to the greenhouse on Saturday morning?***

We can accommodate you if you let the packout leader know in advance that you'd like to pick up your share later. We'll pack up your share and leave it in the cooler with your name on it. This is a service we provide as needed, but please don't abuse the privilege. If you can never pick up on time and cannot make arrangements for someone else to pick up your share for you, perhaps this CSA is not a good choice for you.



*Enright Ridge CSA currently uses a CSA management software program called Farmigo to provide online signup and payment by credit card for our members*

## CSA MANAGEMENT SOFTWARE

Our urban CSA managed for several years using various computerized elements, such as Google Docs, Excel, and QuickBooks, to keep track of the business of farming. It served us well, but we were also intrigued by the notion of having a software management system that provided all the accounting and member management elements we needed in one package. So we started looking at CSA management software.

If you search online for that phrase, you will find that there are several choices, and one thing that they have in common is that they are generally set up for what we'll call a classic community supported agriculture business—a farmer who is growing and selling for profit and who is using the CSA model to ensure that he or she has a market for his crops in advance.

This is not how our urban CSA is set up. One major drawback of commonly available CSA software is that it does not address having members who work at the farm as well as pay for a share of the produce. The management software also offers more features than a small urban CSA may need, but if you can justify the monthly cost (most providers charge a percentage of your sales, which in the case of a co-op CSA farm is the amount charged for your shares divided by the number of months you provide produce) then you should look into what these programs offer and how they can streamline your operations.

## ESTABLISHING VALUE CHAINS WITH YOUR CSA

A value chain is a chain of activities performed on raw materials to create something more valuable (a product or service) than the sum of the cost of the raw materials. When you are working to establish an urban CSA, it is helpful to consider how the resources invested in urban farming can bring more value than the price paid for them.

There is a temptation for people to go to the supermarket and buy their fruits and vegetables there because they are cheap. Stores use fresh fruits and vegetables as loss leaders to get people in the door. They are willing to lose some money on produce because their real profit is in processed foods. It is hard to convince people in our society to pay a little extra for an item even if it is clearly of higher quality; we are always looking for bargains and ways to “save.” It is difficult, when pricing shares, to find the point at which you can farm productively but stay competitive with the supermarkets.

The value added in produce from a garden involves the work of the community. It’s possible to see an increase in value of up to six times the cost of seeds and water in what the harvested vegetables were worth. Of course, there are many more expenses involved in running a CSA than just seeds and water, but in the long run, the resources invested in urban farming can bring more value than the price paid.

Some things of value that the CSA provides:

- ▶ Training for interns who can go on to find another position in farming, increasing the number of local, sustainable urban farms
- ▶ Locally grown organic food that lowers our carbon footprint
- ▶ Truly fresh fruits and vegetables that provide greater nutrition

All of this raises the value of the food we get at the CSA—and we receive a lot more than just a bag of vegetables once a week:

- ▶ Shareholders get the opportunity to learn about gardening.
- ▶ They can see the fields where their food is grown and how it is grown.
- ▶ They join with other people who value quality food to form a supportive community.
- ▶ They can share recipes and ideas about preparing fresh, wholesome food.



*Shareholders and their families, interns, and students in the community benefit from the establishment of a CSA when they learn more about where their food comes from (PHOTO: NANCY SULLIVAN)*

# LABOR ISSUES

Like any business, the CSA needs to be aware of issues involving its labor force, both paid and unpaid. Liability insurance is important in case someone gets hurt doing farm work or just visiting the premises. There are also a lot of other aspects of having employees, including regulations regarding the minimum wage, workers' comp coverage, tax withholding, and other requirements of labor law.



*Tasks such as watering nursery starts can be done by CSA volunteers and workshare members with a minimum of training and supervision*

There are ways to avoid having to get too involved with labor law, including hiring staff on a contract, so that they are essentially self-employed, doing the farm work for you according to a contract you negotiate in advance rather than as a salaried or hourly employee. Although this is an option, and one we have used, the argument can be made that it shortchanges the farmer. We want to see urban farms in every neighborhood, as a sustainable way to provide food and work for people in cities. In the long run, we have a goal of making sure urban farm workers are paid a living wage and reasonable benefits to make this work rewarding in every way.

For now, however, we want the urban farm model to become established, and in some cases that means negotiating a compromise to make it possible to pay the farm staff. The Vista and AmeriCorps programs are another way we have found to acquire lower-cost employees, and in those cases, most of the paperwork and tax requirements are taken care of by the umbrella organization providing the workers rather than being the responsibility of the CSA. We want to believe that someday urban farms will be a common source of employment for skilled people in our cities, but for now, we need to find creative ways to compensate workers properly, and this can include anything from on-the-job training to help with housing in addition to a salary.

## Interns and Trainees

You may have some staff members who are learning how to farm and are willing to work either as unpaid trainees or as interns at a fairly low wage in return for the training they receive. This provides benefits on both sides, because your CSA gets hard-working staff and the trainees get a unique chance to learn while doing. Although some people are uncomfortable with this arrangement, feeling it can take advantage of the interns and trainees, keep in mind that many people pay large sums of money to attend colleges and vocational schools to learn a profession or trade, and even people working in their chosen fields often pay to attend workshops or acquire continuing education credits to keep up to date with the methods used for their work.

We believe that the hands-on experience we can give interns and trainees is a superior way to learn to farm, and it is an comparatively inexpensive way to learn a useful and valuable trade. These staff members still may be considered employees from a legal standpoint, however. Check with your local laws, and make sure you and your intern/trainees both understand up front what is involved in the training program you provide insofar as wages and other benefits are concerned.

## Work Share Workers

Many CSAs require working hours for their members, and if you set up as a co-operative farm, you will definitely depend on your members to do much of the work on the farm. With minimal training and proper supervision, shareholders can help with planting, watering, pest management, harvest, and many other chores, both on the farm side and the business side.

That's one of the reasons members join a co-op CSA, to make a real connection with growing their own food. They want to get their hands dirty and get involved with the work, and many tasks are available without too much training. It also makes sense to find out if members have any skills they can apply to jobs around the farm, from accounting to sign painting to tool repair.

## JOB CREATION

As family farms have disappeared, there are fewer opportunities for people who love farming to find a way to pursue this as an occupation. An urban CSA provides employment for farmers, and it also allows others who are interested to learn to farm as interns. But that's not the only way it can have an impact on employment in the community. A CSA may choose to purchase eggs from a neighbor, buy tools and have them sharpened at the local hardware store, or find a source of locally grown seeds. All of these, while not providing jobs directly, can provide people in the area with an outlet for their goods and can help make their jobs and their businesses profitable.

In the long run, an urban CSA may decide to provide food products for sale with added value. If you have access to a commercial kitchen, you may even consider processing some of what you grow to sell as packaged foods. The possibilities are perhaps not endless, but with a little creative thinking, there are ways to make local food production a source of employment for people in the neighborhood.

## Strengthening the Community

It's been said that gardens and farms in city neighborhoods can help create a sense of place. Whether you actively seek to con-



*Urban farms and gardens can create a sense of community and help bring together diverse populations in city neighborhoods*

struct a community around your farm or watch it develop on its own, you will find that the CSA you start will make people come together and create a stronger neighborhood spirit. Some CSAs attempt to be more inclusive by donating a few shares to families who otherwise would not be able to afford to be part of the farm. The goal is to support the community—and to watch as the community supports the farm, too.

We hope you will also benefit from the lessons we've learned at the Enright Ridge CSA, and we wish you success as you start your own urban farm project. You're helping us see our dream of having an urban CSA in every neighborhood, growing wholesome food together as a community. ■