



## A GUIDE FOR THE ESTABLISHMENT OF COMMUNITY SUPPORTED AGRICULTURE FARMS IN VICTORIA

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# Introduction

This guide is aimed at assisting anyone wishing to establish a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) farm in Victoria, particularly for the Shire of Yarra Ranges and the Shire of Nillumbik. The intention is not to provide a comprehensive manual, but to indicate the main aspects involved in running a CSA farm. As the majority of CSA farms tend to only provide fruit and vegetables, there is an emphasis on these within the guide. However it is acknowledged that there is a large potential for providing other products, such as meat and dairy, particularly via a cooperative CSA.

While substantial horticultural experience is not a requirement to commence a CSA farm, this guide does assume some knowledge of fruit or vegetable growing. For those who do lack growing experience, references to several useful resources for beginner growers are included. Issues such as maintaining continuity of supply are a major issue for CSA farmers and vital to their success, thus prospective CSA farmers must be confident of being able to satisfy these requirements, or of accessing resources to assist in these areas.

Most of the information in this guide relates to those who wish to initiate a CSA as a single farmer, however some information is also given for those who wish to form a cooperative CSA. Cooperatives can be a valuable way for those unfamiliar with CSA to be introduced to the concept. Also note that while most of the material is derived from CSA enterprises in the USA, it has been adapted for Australian conditions where necessary.

Community Supported Agriculture is only one of the many possible methods of direct marketing of agricultural products. Appendix 1 lists some other options which also foster a relationship between farmers and consumers.

After discussing the results of studies of CSA farms in the USA, this guide covers the range of factors to be considered in setting up and maintaining a CSA farm, which can be divided into:

- Business details
- Customer details and relationships
- Production details

Resources for those wanting more information are also provided.

## Background

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) is a direct partnership between farmers and consumers (members), however beyond this basic concept, CSA farms can differ widely in a number of areas. In the “pure” form of CSA, consumers initiate the CSA farm, or become members of an existing enterprise by agreeing to pay a ‘share’ in advance for produce (e.g. annually). In return, members receive a portion of whatever the farm has ready to harvest each week, which will vary throughout the season/year. Members are ideally involved in the running of most aspects of the farm, although the farmer retains control of production. Production differs from conventional produce growing mainly in the wide range of varieties that need to be grown by a single farmer at any point in time, (unless a cooperative CSA is formed). Farmers aim to produce a sufficient quantity and variety of fresh, quality food for their members on a weekly basis and generally encourage members to visit the farm, either informally or via tours, workdays, and sometimes 'working shares' (see glossary).

CSA therefore gives consumers a chance to support a local small farmer and receive locally produced fresh food, with an option of being involved in some of the production and distribution components of the business. Activities which members are sometimes involved in include delivery of shares (see glossary), managing membership lists, and writing newsletters.

There is growing concern about the future of farming at the rural-urban interface, due to increased competition, the high price of farmland and the difficulties of farming in densely populated areas. Some of the problems at the rural-urban interface may be associated with an increasing level of disconnection between consumers, food production and farmers. Many non-farmers moving to the rural-urban interface do not understand modern agricultural practices, and the public in general is becoming increasingly sensitive to issues related to environmental quality, and food safety and quality.

Concerns about agricultural odours, dust, and chemicals may, in part, be exacerbated by both limited knowledge and heightened safety and quality concerns. As a result, consumer confidence in local farmers as well as the food system in general may contribute to conflict at the rural-urban interface (Sharp, Imerman *et al.* 2002). One of the many benefits of CSA farms is the potential to reduce the disconnection between consumers and farming, and hence rural-urban conflict.

Globalisation is also an important driver for direct marketing methods, including farmers’ markets and CSA farms. Amongst other issues, there is a growing perception of the disadvantages of relying on products produced in distant countries, and the advantages of supporting local businesses.

*“Community Supported Agriculture is a small movement with a huge potential ... (by) directly linking farmers and consumers”*

# Benefits of Community Supported Agriculture

For farmers the benefits are:

- Guaranteed income at the beginning of the year
- Reduction in time spent on marketing
- Satisfaction gained from interaction and feedback from consumers
- Opportunity to grow varieties that are not viable commercially
- Costs of environmentally friendly growing practices can be compensated for

For consumers the benefits include:

- Access to fresh local produce
- Opportunity to learn about agricultural systems
- Costs to consumers may be lower than retail prices (particularly retail organic prices)
- Social benefits from interacting with like-minded people
- Satisfaction from supporting local farmers

Society benefits by:

- Potential for retention of farms and farm families in rural-urban fringe (because of a viable agricultural enterprise)
- Increased understanding between rural and urban communities
- Potential for increased use of environmentally friendly growing practices
- Potential enhanced health benefits from increased consumption of fruit and vegetables
- Reduction in the distance food travels and of packaging of food



The potential for CSA farms to increase the connection and understanding between urban and rural communities occurs by involving urban communities in the production of food and farming in general. As Goldsmith and Mander (2001: 261) suggest, CSA farms ‘increase consumer influence over production and allow consumers to become participatory members in their own food economy’. They also found that newsletters, farm visits and personal contacts increase the contact between farmers, consumers and local communities and by promoting local employment they can also foster community regeneration. In turn, there is much higher likelihood of care of the environment and the production of high quality food due to the link between consumers, farmers and farms. In addition, by receiving payment up front, farmers are in a better position to allocate resources to address environmental issues.

## Case Studies

While both of the following CSA farms are relatively large, it is important to note that they took a few years to reach this size. These case studies illustrate the size that can ultimately be achieved. However many CSA farms choose to remain small even if they have sufficient land and consumer interest to expand.

### ***Angelic Organics – Illinois, USA***

Angelic Organics is a biodynamic farm located near Chicago, Illinois in North America. John Peterson initiated the CSA farm, on the property which his father and his grandfather farmed conventionally in the past. A variety of pressures almost led to the sale of farm, then John decided to farm organically, and then to start the CSA enterprise in 1990. He currently has over 1,000 members. John Peterson is a prominent figure in advocating the sustainability of small farms, and recently made a documentary film



“The Real Dirt on Farmer John”, detailing the transformation of his ailing farm to a successful CSA enterprise. The farm also includes a not-for-profit Learning Centre, the aim of which is to “empower people to create sustainable communities of soils, plants, animals and people through educational, creative, and experiential”. Education and training programs are run for 3,000 youth, adults and families per year. The above photo shows the fields, and the farm sheds of Angelic Organics, including the packing and distribution area, with the Learning Centre in the background.

### **Maple Creek Farm – Michigan, USA.**

Maple Creek farm is a certified organic farm located in Michigan in the U.S.A.. Michelle and Danny Lutz, with the help of their three daughters, began the farm ten years ago as beginning farmers. The farm is 80 acres (32 ha) in total, of which 55 acres (22 ha) is used for vegetables and fruit, ten acres (4 ha) for pasture and five to ten acres (2 to 4 ha) for cover crops. They currently have 440 members, and are considering increasing that to 500 members. Their season runs for 18 weeks, from mid-June to mid-late October. They offer four different types of memberships:

- Standard Farm Pick-Up membership
- Deluxe Farm Pick-Up Membership
- Standard Supporting Membership
- Deluxe Supporting Membership

The standard membership involves one box per week, while the deluxe membership includes two boxes per week. The pick up membership involves the members collecting the produce from the farm, while for supporting membership, members pick the produce up from a site close to them (there is a choice of 21 different sites). The brochure for Maple Creek Farm details the fruit and vegetables they can expect to receive for each of the 18 weeks of the season. This includes four types of lettuce, two of zucchini, two of cucumber, peppers, broccoli, cabbage, kale, potatoes, onions, shallots, brussel sprouts, turnips, eggplant, sweet corn, tomatoes, basil, garlic, chives, pumpkin, green beans, artichoke, watermelon, canteloupe, strawberries, raspberries, apples and pears.

Members are encouraged to participate with tasks such as weeding, greenhouse work and harvesting, as well as other ‘one-off’ activities. For instance, one task includes compiling and selling a recipe book as a fund raiser for another greenhouse. Michelle and Danny appreciate the help from their members, but do note that there could be more input into the farm from their members. One of the jobs which they would like



members to help with is deliveries of the boxes. This is carried out over three days and requires a substantial amount of time away from the farm, but to date they have been unable to find a member or members who could take responsibility for this task. The above photo shows two poly-tunnels on Maple Creek Farm, which allows the growing season to be extended, and some of the farm equipment.

## The USA Experience

The USA overwhelmingly has the highest number of CSA farms per head of population. The 1999 National CSA Farm Survey was the first comprehensive report on CSA farms in the USA (Lass, Stevenson *et al.* 2003). The main results of the survey are as follows:

- Average business age was 5.5 years
- Average age of CSA operators was 44 years (for all US farms the average is 54 years old) with many new farmers entering CSA farming from diverse occupations such as postal workers, truck drivers, journalists, etc (Henderson and En 1999: 32)
- A median of 3 acres was used for CSA operations, average total land was 60 acres (24 ha)
- Average length of delivery season was 23 weeks
- 44% had land use arrangements other than private ownership, such as rental agreements or land trusts
- 63% were run by sole proprietorship (compared to 86% of all US farms in the 1997 Farm Census), 12% by partnerships, 11% by corporations, 14% alternative structures such as not for profit
- Median of 29 full shares and 23 half shares (worth a median \$A588 and \$A376 respectively)
- 94% classified their farms as organic or biodynamic, about half of which were certified
- 60% of farms had income of \$A28,500 or more, compared to only 39% for all USA farms
- 72% did not have a core group (see glossary). Those that did have a core group received about AU\$14,000 more in income
- 95% of operators were interested in participating in future research and information gathering related to CSA, 82% would consider mentoring a start-up CSA farmer.

These statistics reflect that the CSA movement is a healthy one in the USA, and that it is characterised by much diversity. In particular the many forms of land use and management structures reflect the flexibility within the concept. Many of the statistics compare favourably when looking at “conventional” farmers, such as levels of income and the age of farmers. Because of the member input into production methods, and strong consumer interest in organics and environmental issues, CSA farms may be an important incentive to increasing the sustainability of farms. Finally, the high number of farmers who stated they are willing to participate in research and information gathering and in mentoring new farmers indicates a high level of motivation within the movement.

Also evident from the USA experience is that CSA farms reflect the culture of the communities they serve, the characteristics of the land and the farmers, thus no CSA farms will be the same. In addition, CSA farms tend to be dynamic and change as the community’s needs change over time.

*“...we’re very happy not only with the growth in our CSA,  
but in CSA as a whole concept”*

## Getting Started

A frequent message from existing CSA farmers is to start small, be well prepared and be patient. You may need sufficient capital for the first two years of operation until the CSA farm becomes self-supporting. Be prepared to spend time in the early stages on educating your members on the concept of CSA. In the meantime you may need to keep a main crop and sell it in other markets. In fact supplying farmers' markets is a good way to not only earn some extra income, but also to iron out production problems, and at the same time recruit potential CSA members. Starting with five to ten members allows you to develop and fine tune your production methods, and a communication and business plan before you take on a larger number of members.

CSA farms can be initiated either by farmers (single farmers or a group of farmers) or by consumers (again either by a single consumer or a group of consumers). CSA farms which are initiated by consumers tend to result in higher levels of commitment from the members.

### ***Existing farm businesses***

Many existing farm businesses can be converted to a CSA enterprise. Whether you prefer to start a CSA farm as a sole proprietor or whether you would need to link together with other farmers will depend largely on the variety of crops or products you are able to supply. Consumers will tend to be more willing to become involved in a CSA enterprise where there is a large variety of produce available. With regards to member involvement in the farm/s, while some types of farms may be more conducive to tasks at the farm level, e.g. vegetable farms, other types may be less so. However there are still many opportunities for involvement with other more administrative tasks such as writing newsletters and membership database management.

### ***The initial decision***

While the ultimate philosophy of community supported agriculture is that farms are initiated by the community, in the USA up to 80% are initiated by farmers (Henderson and En 1999). Converting to a CSA is easiest for farmers who own land and equipment, and have some commercial experience with growing fruit and/or vegetables. However neither of these is essential. The questions then involved in the decision to convert include:

- Is the location of the farm likely to attract CSA members or can I distribute easily to potential member locations?
- Can I produce the variety of crops necessary?
- How many members can I produce for?
- Would I prefer to run a CSA by myself, or would forming a cooperative be a better option?
- Will this enterprise provide me enough income, or should I produce for other markets as well?
- How much participation from members would I like?
- Will I run the enterprise on a seasonal or annual basis?

Commonly the first action after you have made the decision to “dip your toe in the water” is to begin to look for members, which may include holding an exploratory meeting of prospective members and farmers.

Steps to forming a CSA:

- Issue a call to form a CSA, and seek possible members
- Hold an exploratory meeting – with the aim of forming a core group

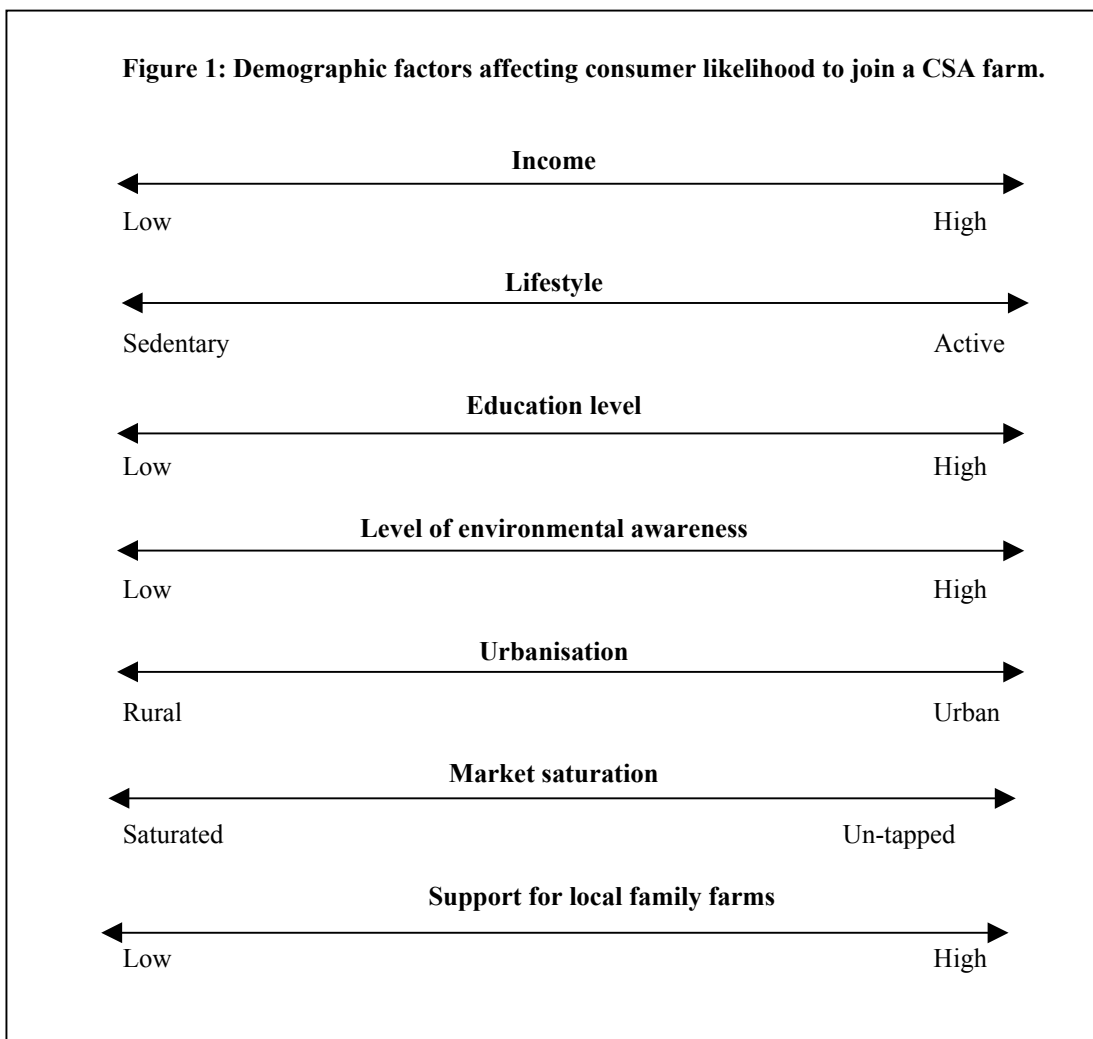
- Agree on group’s values and guiding principles e.g. how much participation will occur, how much production risk will be shared by members, what food items does the group want?
- Organise the core group to divide up member responsibilities, set share prices etc
- The core group recruits members to post fliers, organise media releases, talk to friends
- Seek financial commitment from members
- Decide on the basic legal structure of the CSA
- Determine capitalisation of the farm (note - many start with a minimum of equipment)

*“One of the abiding concepts of community supported agriculture is that there is a future in farming”.*

**Analysing your customer base**

An important factor in deciding whether to commence a CSA enterprise is the farm location. The demographics of the area where your potential members live will be important in determining how receptive in general residents will be to joining a CSA.

Demographic factors, towards the right of each of the following factors in Figure 1, mean that consumers may be more likely to join a CSA farm. This has been confirmed by studies particularly in analysing the markets for organics. Those who are better educated, with higher incomes are more likely to buy organic food, which also correlates with the demographics of CSA members.



### ***Finding members***

To source your initial members, apart from putting the word out among friends, look to advertise in places where people congregate. Local and city businesses, civic groups, schools and churches are examples of places you could approach. Distributing flyers in health food stores, neighbourhood houses, fairs, etc, may also help. Once you have a few members, word of mouth is particularly successful for CSA farms. Offering discounts for members who recruit others will help boost numbers in the initial phase. Offering a short trial period can work for those who are uncertain about the concept.

### ***Printed material***

A brochure or even a handbook will both help in finding new members, and for managing expectations of existing members. As well as explaining how CSA farms work and your specific farm works, other issues such as safety on the farm (for visitors) should be included. If the brochure or handbook lists all the products that will be supplied with a calendar of when they will be harvested, members know what to expect and when. Alternatively this can be part of a regular newsletter. A newsletter is standard for most CSA farms, enabling members to keep in touch with events on the farm.



## Business Details

The main factors that must be considered are:

- Land access
- Amount of land required
- Business structure
- Insurance and regulatory approvals
- Combining with other means of income
- Share structure
- Calculation and frequency of payment
- Labour
- Access to industry development bodies
- Sources of investment capital

*“Living on a (CSA) farm blurs the line between life and work – it is a lifestyle choice that usually means less cash, fewer consumer amenities and more physical labour”*

### **Land access**

Gaining access to land can be a limiting factor in establishing CSA farms. The options are to purchase land, lease private land, lease public land or establish a land trust. A strength of the CSA concept over conventional farming is that there is the potential for members to assist financially with procuring land via a land trust. This has occurred in the USA, particularly where a CSA enterprise has been run on leased land for some years and the landowners have later decided to sell the land. While in Australia there has been a higher amount of land ownership than in many other countries, the high cost of land in recent years may see an increased use of alternative land tenure arrangements.

### **Amount of land required**

While a variety of estimates are given to the amount of land needed to support a certain number of members, and hence support a viable business, the most common figure cited is a minimum of 50 shares per hectare (or 20 per acre). These figures assume vegetables only are being produced. There is also a variety of figures given for amounts per share charged by CSA enterprises, but the average is about AUS\$600 (Lass, Stevenson *et al.* 2003). Many state that 100 shares are needed for a single farmer to make a living, which implies about 2 hectares of arable land would be needed. Naturally if only a part time income is required, the amount of land needed decreases.



## **Business structure/ management**

Ideally, the structure you decide on should be closely related to your strategy, so it is important to first clarify what your objectives are. The following then need to be considered. Who should ultimately be in control of the business? Is it the farmer, the members or the landlord? For consumers to share the risks of farming, they need the opportunity to understand and have a say in the way their food is produced. The level of influence members have will be determined by each CSA farm, based partly on the level of knowledge and interest members have with farming issues, e.g. whether they have a say on what crops are planted when, or only for bigger decisions such as the purchase of capital equipment.

The following are details of the different structures that can exist in Victoria (see Business Victoria website – details Appendix 2):

- Sole proprietorship – the farmer is responsible or liable for debts
- Partnership – two or more people do business together either under their own names or a registered name
- Company – a legal body registered established under the Companies legislation
- Trading Trust – normally a company that operates a business for certain beneficiaries
- Cooperatives – must be at least five shareholders, where all shareholders have equal voting rights. Non-trading cooperatives do not distribute profits or surpluses to member, and may or may not have share capital. Trading cooperatives have share capital and may distribute profits to members.
- Incorporated Association – a registered legal entity usually for recreational, cultural or charitable purposes with at least five members with all the profits being used for the purposes of the association.

The advantages of collaboration with other farms under one of the above structures include:

- Crop security – if any of your crops fail, you have backup from your partners
- Equipment and labour can be pooled
- Increased ability to offer a wider range of products

Disadvantages include:

- It can be a challenge for each individual farm to maintain autonomy
- Flexibility can be reduced to respond to opportunities

Resources are included in Appendix 2 to assist with deciding on management structures, and with business management in general. Business Victoria in particular is an informative website (see <http://www.business.vic.gov.au/>) which covers management structures, steps in setting up a small business and grants and financial support that are available.

*“ ... farming is everyone’s responsibility, and... likewise (has) to be accessible for everyone ”*

Since cooperatives offer particular advantages where farmers have little or no experience with the CSA concept, as is the case in Victoria, an example of operating guidelines is provided below as used by Sunflower Fields CSA in the USA. The cooperative consists of 10 farm families, and supplies 225 members (The Community Farm 2003). The Cooperative offers three sizes of vegetable shares as well as flowers, honey, eggs, baked goods, apples, raspberries, strawberries, hand-made soaps, culinary herbs, home made herbal body care kits, home grown teas, chickens, and turkeys.

In addition, "Theme Boxes" are offered, which include ingredients for particular purposes such as for soup, salsa, pickling, home made snacks and festive decorations.

The CSA Cooperative operates under a general set of guidelines created by consensus. Individual farmers then interpret those guidelines as they see fit. Thus the growing is left to the farmers within the CSA guidelines and as soon as the product is brought to the central facility to be post-harvest washed and packed, it is then the Cooperative's responsibility.

Income for each grower is split according to an agreed percentage for basic products like vegetables. Optional products like honey, eggs, chicken, flowers and berries have set prices which are paid to the growers, less 5% for delivery and handling.

Share boxes are designed towards the end of the previous season, giving accurate projections of the amount of each crop needed. From this, a crop calendar is used to identify what crops are to be grown on which farms. The percentages that each farm has responsibility for are then determined; any farm where there may be insufficient earnings is identified, and adjustments made.

The percentages take factors into account such as the number of times the crop is included in a CSA box, how much land is needed, the cost of seed, the amount of seed needed, how labour intensive the crop is, what equipment is needed, etc. Each crop is rated from 1 to 10 for each factor and an average calculated. The final figure is the crop value. All crop values are added to give the total growing demand, which is used to calculate the percentages and hence the payment made to each farm (The Community Farm 2003).

*"...our family found the work requirement one of the highlights of belonging to a CSA"*

### **Quality assurance**

CSA farms do not need to be certified under a QA scheme. Surveys conducted on the reasons consumers join CSA farms show that having access to fresh, local, organically grown produce is the major motivation (Perez, Allen *et al.* 2003). In the USA, members tend to play the role of "auditor", if they see a practice which they feel may compromise the cleanness and greenness of the produce, they will soon let that be known to the farmer, who will lose customers if he or she does not use practices considered acceptable to consumers. Being exposed to the farm can also educate consumers about food safety issues.

### **Insurance and regulatory approvals in Victoria**

Business Victoria (see Appendix 2) state that the essential insurance policies for small businesses are for fire, loss of gross profit, public liability and employees' liability. Public liability is especially important for CSA farms, since it covers potential liabilities to third parties for personal injury or property, in the case of negligence by the farm owner/operator. In addition to these policies, you may also want to investigate product liability and Volunteers Workers Personal Accident, (see [http://www.volunteering.com.au/find\\_volunteers/how\\_to\\_involve\\_volunteers/insurance.asp](http://www.volunteering.com.au/find_volunteers/how_to_involve_volunteers/insurance.asp)) which covers for accidental injury or death for any non-employees, e.g. members who work on your farm. Loss of income, out of pocket expenses and travel to and from the farm are also normally covered. Prospective CSA farmers/groups would need to investigate insurance for their particular circumstances.

All businesses that sell food in Victoria must be registered with the local Council Health Department. To register, you must complete a Food Safety Plan, available from the local Environmental Health Officer at the Shire Council, or at [www.foodsafety.vic.gov.au](http://www.foodsafety.vic.gov.au).

If you are within the Shire of Yarra Ranges, information is also available at [www.yarraranges.vic.gov.au](http://www.yarraranges.vic.gov.au) or for the Shire of Nillumbik, [www.nillumbik.vic.gov.au](http://www.nillumbik.vic.gov.au)

You also need to appoint a Food Safety Supervisor (e.g. yourself) who must be able to prove that they have particular knowledge about food safety, by demonstrating certain competencies which are set out under law. A Registered Training Organisation can provide a certificate of attainment showing the relevant competencies. You will need to show the Certificate to your local Council Environmental Health Officer. A fee is also payable.

If you intend to sell, make, transport or prepare dairy products, you must be registered with Dairy Food Safety Victoria, ph 9810 5900 [www.dairysafe.vic.gov.au](http://www.dairysafe.vic.gov.au). Likewise for meat, you must be registered with Prime Safe ph 9685 7333.

### **Combining with other means of income**

CSA farms are very conducive to combining with supplying fresh produce to other institutions, particularly where local 'clean and green' food is valued. Examples include supplying farmers' markets, restaurants, schools and hospitals. Farmers' markets in particular combine well with CSA enterprises, for example the market can be used for distribution purposes, as well for as for selling excess produce. Farmers who supply both a CSA enterprise and supply Farmers' markets however are careful to ensure that both sets of their customers are serviced to a high level. Neither enterprise should be considered a dumping ground for excess produce of insufficient standard.

### **Length of season and share structure**

The number of weeks of operation of a CSA enterprise is largely dependent on climate, and on the length of time you are willing to maintain the intensive amount of work required to supply CSA members with produce. In parts of the USA, only 26 weeks of produce can be produced, whereas in many parts of Australia sufficient produce can be grown all year round. There are many ways of extending the season as will be discussed in the section on production. Shares differ between CSA farms, but generally a full share will supply enough produce for an 'average' size family, e.g. two adults and two children. Some CSA farms sell half shares, which are half the quantity of a full share, but slightly more than half the cost due to the extra work involved. Some CSA farms will customise shares to some degree, such as providing 'Gourmet' shares.

*"Our waiting list is long and achieved all through word of mouth because the members feel they are getting far more than just great produce"*

### **Calculation and frequency of payment**

Under-pricing is the most common reason for the failure of CSA farms. It is important to include all the costs of the CSA farm, including a reasonable wage for the farmer. Common methods to calculate the amount of each share include: division of the total farm budget by the number of members; by each member pledging a certain amount based on their perception of what is a "fair" price; or by basing the price on the equivalent market value of the produce. The first option seems to be most commonly used in the USA, since it is the simplest method, and will ensure the costs of the CSA are covered, provided that adequate costs are included in the initial calculation of the budget.

Payment is normally made in advance (if instead the payment is weekly this is often known as subscription farming). Payments can be made anywhere from annually to weekly, but more support and reliability is provided to the farmer if payments are made quarterly or annually.

### **Labour**

CSA farms have a relatively high labour requirement. Participation by members can greatly help with the many jobs involved, and working shares (see glossary) can entice members who otherwise may not be able to afford to participate. In the USA, CSA farms commonly use interns (a form of apprentice). CSA farms have a major responsibility to interns to teach them a variety of skills necessary for running a CSA farm. Many CSA farms are involved in programs providing work for disadvantaged groups (such as Gravel Hill Gardens in Bendigo, which works with the Salvation Army and disabled groups), giving benefits to both these groups and the CSA farm, and to differing degrees helping with labour requirements.

### **Industry development bodies**

Industry development bodies are formed for the express purpose of promoting a particular industry. These bodies overseas have greatly contributed to the growth of the number of CSA farms in various countries. Examples include Equiterre (<http://www.equiterre.qc.ca>) in Canada, the Soil Association (<http://www.cuco.org.uk>), in the UK, AMAP (Association pour le Maintien d'une Agriculture Paysanne) in France, and in the USA there are various bodies including CSA-MI, (CSA Michigan) and MACSAC (Madison Area Community Supported Agriculture Coalition).



### **Public relations/advertising**

CSA farmers in the USA maintain that it is not necessary to pay for advertising to attract new members. Ways of recruiting members include:

- Distributing brochures in health food stores; vegetarian restaurants; health clubs; chiropractic clinics; other alternative medical offices; recycling, Yoga, tai chi, spirituality centres; and church and school bulletin boards
- Local radio and TV talk shows, local newspapers
- Hold recruitment meetings.

### **Sources of investment capital**

If needed, start up and on-going capital can be obtained via member fees, or it may be possible to access grants such as the Sustainability Fund (see [www.epa.vic.gov.au](http://www.epa.vic.gov.au)). A comprehensive list of Commonwealth Government grants can be found at [www.grantslink.gov.au](http://www.grantslink.gov.au). Alternatively the group may seek a bank loan.

## Customer Details and Relationships

Relationships with your customers, (i.e. members), will dictate the success of your CSA. Delivery, communication and participation will vary according to the types of members you have, and where your farm is located, but also remember that methods you choose in the beginning can and will change as your CSA farm (and your members!) matures.

### **Delivery**

The methods for distributing the produce to members include:

- Members pick up the produce from the farm
- Coordinators/farmer deliver to set 'collection points'
- Coordinators/farmer delivers to the member's door

### **Communication with consumers**

Connection with the farm is an important point of differentiation for CSA farms, compared to conventional food channels, thus communication to foster this connection is also vital. Mechanisms for communicating with members and potential members include:

- Informational and other meetings
- Weekly newsletters
- Feedback surveys
- Welcome folders
- Regular face-to-face contact with farmer/s

Of the above methods, newsletters are one of the more important strategies to communicate with members. Newsletters can be delivered with the produce, e.g. weekly (or monthly) and commonly include details of activities on the farm, recipes, and facts about particular vegetables. The internet is also increasingly used by CSA farmers, both to provide information to current and potential CSA members, and to seek feedback from members.

*"We have never been sorry we joined and have reaped benefits far beyond our original expectations of good healthy food and environmental protection".*

### **Participation**

Participation can assist with building a connection to a CSA farm. Some of the ways farms can foster participation are:

- Working shares (members receive a fee reduction in return for helping on the farm)
- "Pot luck" dinners (everyone brings a plate) – on or off the farm
- Festivals/field days on the farm
- Classes/demonstrations regarding food preservation
- Pick your own, e.g. flowers, strawberries, -free to members
- Events, e.g. "tomato canning"
- Financial participation, e.g. community shares (see glossary)

## Production Details

If you are not already an experienced grower, there are two recommended ways in which you can acquire the necessary skills (while it is possible to learn on the job, this can lead to many costly mistakes). The first is to work on a CSA farm (or a similar farm, that is, one which produces many different crops on a small scale), where you can learn on the job. The second is to complete a horticulture course. In addition, there are many printed resources on horticultural production, including material from the USA specifically for CSA farmers (see the Appendix 2 for examples).

The major ways in which producing within the CSA environment differ from conventional production are discussed below.

### ***Crop planning***

Developing a crop plan prior to the start of the season is vital, and will be dependent on how much land is available for planting. While you may decide in the first few seasons what to plant, once you have a committed group of members, you might encourage contribution from members on what their preferences are. This will help with tailoring your produce for the members' tastes. Asking members via a questionnaire what their likes and dislikes are, and roughly what quantities they tend to consume can be helpful.

It is recommended you plant 25% more than you estimate you will need, to allow for failures, inclement weather, etc. Some CSA farmers also plant ornamental flowers as a back-up in case of crop failures, so on a 'lean week' they can add something more to the delivery box/basket.

There are various resources which can help with what can be a difficult task of providing a continual supply of sufficient variety of products. Henderson's book, "Sharing the Harvest" (see Appendix 2) provides comprehensive information on the individual amount of produce that needs to be provided per season, both by weight and by quantity, a succession planting planning chart, showing area required, dates for seeding in the greenhouse and for direct seeding, the amount of seed needed, and the resulting amount that would be harvested. There are other resources available that have been developed in the USA, such as software to help growers calculate how much of each crop to grow for a certain number of members. Some of these can be found by conducting a search on the internet.

*"A CSA is not a grocery store or even an alternative to a grocery store"*

### ***Products***

For most CSA farms, fruit and vegetables comprise the majority of the produce supplied to members. However, other products sometimes included are:

- Eggs
- Dairy – milk, yoghurt, quark, soft and hard cheese
- Chicken, pork, beef
- Flowers
- Grains and/or bread
- Preserved fruit and vegetables

- Other added products such as snack foods
- Firewood

Many CSA farms include basic fruit and vegetables as the standard delivery, then offer additional items as a separate share.

### ***Cultural practices***

Often consumers interested in alternative supply channels for fresh produce are also interested in ‘environmentally friendly’ or organic/biodynamic production methods. Thus generally CSA farms are either certified or uncertified organic or biodynamic. Other systems used are described as “low input”, ie may use a small amount of chemicals.



CSA farmers in the USA are divided on whether organic certification is necessary or not. Many feel that certification is unnecessary due to the close relationship of consumers to the farm. Others prefer to be certified, particularly those who supply additional markets such as farmers’ markets or restaurants.

Many CSA farms also practice low input in terms of energy, through fuel, by minimising the use of machinery. These tend to be smaller farms, with more machinery generally used as farm size increases. Henderson and En (1999) suggest that anything over two acres (0.8 ha) requires the use of mechanical equipment.

### ***Important production concepts***

Extending the growing season of produce can be an important strategy for CSA farms, to both provide more variety in the boxes and increase the quantity of food available for a longer period of time. The additional cost of extending the season needs to be included in the share price. The main method of extending the season is the use of protected cropping such as poly-tunnels and greenhouses. Crop storage can also be used to even out supplies, particularly for potatoes, onions and carrots.

Succession planting is another important concept for CSA farms. This can be achieved through either staggering planting times or using a variety of planting methods so that crops mature at different times. For example, seeding into the ground, into seeding flats and into soil blocks on the same day allows harvesting to occur over an extended period. Variety selection can also be used to stagger harvesting times. Growing practices are otherwise generally dictated by sustainable agriculture philosophies, such as use of rotations and green manures.

### ***Inputs: seeds or seedlings?***

The main decision that has to be made with regards to inputs is whether to use seeds or seedlings. Some CSA farmers recommend transplanting all crops, only direct seeding those vegetables that are not practical or economical to transplant. Transplants allow greater assurance of maximum yields than direct seeding, and greater predicability of harvest dates. However finding a source of seedlings can be a problem, particularly for the varieties of produce needed. Direct seeding often allows a much wider range of crops to be grown. Many CSA farms in the USA use a combination of direct seeding and transplanting of seedlings.

### **Weeds and pests**

Physical control, mainly cultivation, is the principal method of weed control for low input farming, and hence for CSA farms. Cultivation involves shallow disturbance of the soil just after weeds have germinated to remove them.

### **Harvesting and post-harvest handling**

Harvesting and post-handling are an important component of CSA farms, and comprises 50% or more of the time and energy involved in the production of fruits and vegetables. Freshness and quality of produce are vital for CSA farms, contributed to by minimising the time between harvest and delivery to members. Produce should be harvested either early in the morning or in the evening, when the weather is cooler. Produce should never be left in the sun, but should be washed (note that CSA farms wash their produce to differing degrees) and stored in a cool place as quickly as possible. Heat affects plants differently - see Henderson, *Sharing the Harvest* (page 146) for a chart of the respiration rates of fruits and vegetables. This indicates the nutritional quality loss per hour for produce stored at different temperatures. While refrigeration is not always necessary it can help extend shelf life.



Regarding the amount of cleaning of produce after harvest, Henderson notes while many farmers pride themselves on their high standard of presentation of produce, the budget rarely covers the amount of time this involves. Therefore some farmers only remove dead leaves and weeds, obvious slugs, and rinse off dirt clods. She points out that members becoming involved in the actual harvesting helps enormously with their understanding of what is involved, and helps if they had previously expressed any concerns about excess dirt or insects in the produce.

This is not seen as compromising the quality of the produce or food safety issues, rather it is a member education issue.

### **Box contents**

CSA produce is usually delivered in a box or some other container. Consideration needs to be given to how containers will be returned to be used the following week, and which shapes are the easiest to store and transport. There are two factors that govern the contents of the weekly boxes. Firstly is what gets planted or produced, which can either be decided solely by the farmer/s, or by members and the farmer/s. Secondly is what proportion the members receive each week from what is harvested. Some ways of deciding on the second issue are:

- Whatever gets picked – this is the easiest option, but may be the least favoured option by members.
- All produce is placed on a table with advice on how much each member can take – however members must come and pick it up! Alternatively, consumers harvest their own produce.
- Order by email or via a website.

Ordering electronically is becoming more common in the USA as farmers try to satisfy member requirements. In the USA Mid Atlantic survey, close to half of the CSA farmers interviewed offered an element of choice of how members could receive produce, e.g. setting up something similar to a market stall and giving members a limit to the number of items they could take (Oberholtzer 2004: 13).

Some CSA members find it difficult to adjust to the large quantity of vegetables received every week (particularly for a member who does not have a large family and where no half-share is available). Various strategies can be used by CSA farms to help with this, including giving it to friends (this acts as free

promotion for the CSA), donating to the needy or putting in a swap bin for others to take. Recipes of novel ways to use the produce can always help, and add value to membership of the CSA farm.

### ***Possible problems***

The primary reasons why CSA farms fail, or for individual members leaving, are:

- Not charging sufficiently for share prices so that the farmer's full salary is not covered
- Failure to develop a strong core group (Henderson and En 1999: 224)
- Members can be overwhelmed by the amount of food they receive
- Excessive labour requirements
- Failure to create community.

It is important to note that creating a CSA enterprise takes a lot of time and patience. While there may be many problems initially, with the help of your members, most problems can be sorted out. The rewards of perseverance are encapsulated by this comment from a CSA farmer in the USA.

*“For us, the CSA concept fits well. It is clearly the most rewarding style of marketing that we have encountered”*



## Appendix 1: Forms of Direct Marketing and Glossary

Community Supported Agriculture is only one of the many forms of direct marketing that can capitalise on the growing demand for locally grown foods. Other options include:

- Farmers' markets
- Farm sales direct from the farm
- Vegetable box schemes
- Pick Your Own (e.g. strawberries)
- Restaurant, school or hospital sales

These all require identification of markets with special needs and a large enough volume to generate profitable returns. The website of the Sustainable Agriculture Network (SAN) in the USA has a report on marketing strategies such as those mentioned above; titled "Reap New Profits: Marketing Strategies for Farmers and Ranchers". It can be found at: <http://www.sare.org/coreinfo/marketing.htm>

### Glossary

Community shares – a reduced fee for those who would like to be a member but do not wish to receive weekly produce.

Core group – a group of members who work with the farmer/s to run the CSA. Working groups may also be formed to undertake specific tasks such as newsletter production.

Shares – an advance payment for a weekly box of produce. Members are also generally encouraged to maintain contact with the farm, rather than only having a financial transaction, e.g. by visiting or helping on the farm.

Working shares – a reduced payment for the weekly box of produce, subsidised by a requirement to work a certain number of hours per week in the CSA e.g. weeding or administrative tasks.

## Appendix 2: Resources

Examples of specific CSA publications (USA based):

Henderson, E. 1999, *Sharing the Harvest: A guide to Community Supported Agriculture*, Chelsea Green Publishing Company.

Groh, T., McFadden, S., 1997, *Farms of Tomorrow Revisited: Community Supported Farms – Farm Supported Communities*, BioDynamic Farming and Gardening Association, Pennsylvania.

Francis, J. (2002), *Recognising the Value and Potential of Small Farms; learning from the USA*. Department of Primary Industries, Victoria.

This publication covers a variety of issues relating to small farms, and has a section on direct marketing, including CSA. It is available from <http://www.dpi.vic.gov.au> - click on Agriculture & Food/ General farming/ Small Farms/ Publications & Research;

The Allsun Garden Farm, “*Growing Annual Vegetables CD-ROM*”, Version 2, 2004 includes general information on vegetable production for small farmers, as well as some information on producing for a CSA farm. The contents include preparing the ground, managing weeds and pests and diseases, and marketing. It is available from <http://www.allsun.com.au/>

Friends of the Earth, *Towards a Community Supported Agriculture*, Brisbane (available from <http://www.brisbane.foe.org.au/>) discusses globalisation, the ecology of food production, food and health, as well as details about community supported agriculture.

Parker, A. (2002) *Feasibility of Community Supported Agriculture in Australia*. RIRDC: Canberra. This report includes Australian case studies of four CSA enterprises and a Community Garden;

Coleman, Eliot, *The New Organic Grower*, 1995, Chelsea Publishing Company.

This book goes into detail about organic growing on small farms. Although it is an American reference, it would be very useful for Australian growers, covering such topics as season extension, direct seeding versus transplants and soil fertility, and includes a section with notes on specific crops.

The Business Victoria website, <http://www.business.vic.gov.au/> may be helpful in terms of deciding what is the most important structure for your business, and how to set up a small business and other related issues.

Meredith R. (ed.), 2003, *Options for change: New ideas for Australian Farmers*, RIRDC, Canberra.

This book has an informative chapter on CSA farming, including an example of a crop plan and a harvesting schedule. It also has a chapter on forming producer marketing groups, and on alternative forms of land tenure. An outline of the contents can be found at <<http://www.rirdc.gov.au/reports/HCC/03-030.pdf>>.

## Appendix 3: Examples of CSA farms in the USA

- Name:* Sunflower Fields CSA  
<http://www.localharvest.org/farms/M5041>
- Features:* Sunflower Fields CSA is a cooperative of 10 farmers, providing a wide range of produce ranging from eggs, chickens, baked goods, apples, berries, honey, flowers and/or home-made soap
- Name:* Bad Axe Farmer's Alliance  
<http://www.landstewardshipproject.org/csa.html#bad>
- Features:* Cooperative of three farms
- Name:* BC Gardens
- Features:* Supplies 100 varieties of vegetables, herbs and edible flowers
- Name:* Hogsback Farm  
<http://www.hogsbackfarm.com>
- Features:* Supplies separate winter shares.
- Name:* Bull Run Mountain vegetable farm  
[http://www.bullrunfarm.com/2003\\_vegetables.htm](http://www.bullrunfarm.com/2003_vegetables.htm)
- Features:* Website gives a history of vegetables received (week by week)
- Name:* Cobble Hill CSA  
<http://www.cobblehillcsa.org/>
- Features:* Cobble Hill allows members to split shares, and will match individuals up who want to split a share but do not know each other.
- Name:* Genesee Valley Organic CSA  
<http://www.gvocsa.org/gvocsafaq.html>
- Features:* Website contains details of how working shares operate.
- Name:* Canticle Farm  
<http://www.fsalle.org/facts.htm>
- Features:* "Fast facts" are provided for each vegetable, along with "smart ideas" for cooking vegetables. Also details 13 reasons for joining a CSA
- Name:* Elsies Farm  
<http://www.elsiesfarm.com/community-share.htm>
- Features:* Provides "community shares", for those who do not want a large amount of vegetables, membership entitles them to discounts at a Farmers' Market, and access to the farm.

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