Taking on CSA members also nullifies any possible shortcuts you may take in your personal garden; perhaps you are not fond of kale, or maybe you find that harvesting arugula is a bit more time-consuming than you’d like. When growing food for a community, such shortcuts are not an option. Valued members will be disappointed if their weekly shares do not include such tasty treats as kale and arugula. As a CSA farmer, your goal should be to provide a bounty of diverse crops that will exceed the expectations of your members and leave them thumbing through their cookbooks, wondering what to do with all the delicious food you have grown. If you can do that, you will be prosperous, and over time you will craft a relationship that cannot be achieved at any supermarket – a personal connection between producer and consumer.

**Taking on members**

First, you need to consider the number of members you will take on. This number will determine the amount of capital, land and labor you will need to get started. My advice is to start small.

If you are plowing new ground, take the time to learn about your soil and its ability to yield crops so

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**Community Supported Agriculture (CSA)** is a farming model in which community members invest in the farmer and, in return, they receive produce and any number of other farm products the CSA grower offers. A person interested in starting a vegetable CSA should be prepared to not only grow an abundance of good food but also run a business. It will take endless planning, hard work, creative thinking, marketing and customer service to be successful.

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MARKETING

Next to working 14 hours each day, seven days a week, marketing your CSA is the most time-consuming and important chore on the farm. I have found four components to successfully marketing a new CSA.

1. **GRASSROOTS** – Start with business cards and a good old-fashioned tear-tag flier with information about your CSA. Hang them in nearby coffee shops, post offices, food co-ops and libraries. They will be well worth the few dollars you spend to have them printed.

2. **A WEBSITE** – I suggest using WordPress.com to establish a web presence. The site’s service can also be used as a blog and is easy to administer.

3. **A NEWSLETTER** – Weekly newsletters keep your customers up to date on farm activities and harvest schedules. I highly recommend MailChimp.com to manage your subscriber database.

4. **SOCIAL MEDIA** – This is a great way to create product evangelists as your followers enjoy photos of your products and live vicariously through your farming adventures. At minimum, you should create a Facebook page for your farm.
you can meet the expectations of your members. How many members should you accept? In my experience, feeding 20 people and your family on 1 acre of land with one full-time labor assistant is achievable. That equation is scalable.

If your goal is to feed 60 people, consider growing 3 acres of crops and hiring three assistants or volunteers for the season. You must be realistic when it comes to how much land you can cultivate, how frequently you can succession plant, how much labor you will have available, and how many members you can acquire.

Receiving members in February is great, and it will alleviate financial strain, but not having enough crops or labor to fulfill your customers’ needs in August will leave you emotionally and physically exhausted.

Pricing

Membership pricing should be fair and reflect both your end-product and your operating expenses.

Consider the following pricing structure for your start-up CSA: $25 per week for a single adult, $35 for two adults, and $45 for a family of two adults and two to three children.

Over the years, as you expand, your growing season will become longer, your overhead will rise, and the quality and quantity of your shares will increase. As a result, your prices will increase accordingly. Each week, your members should walk away with more food for less money than they would receive at the farmers’ market or grocery store.

Also, it’s worth noting, the pricing and estimates in this article are for one particular CSA farm; expenses, revenues and such will vary depending on soil quality, sunlight quality, location, growing zone and myriad factors. Use the specific monetary estimates in this article as a guide rather than an absolute.

Seed order

Nothing is more alluring on a cold winter night when snow blankets the fields than scrolling through colorful pages of seed catalogs. They can easily make you forget the frigid temperatures, as well as how many varieties you can conceivably plant. Starting seeds happens as early as March, so you should place the bulk of your seed order by mid-February.

In the mail, you’ll receive a simple cardboard box filled with seed packets. There is nothing boring or ordinary about the contents of this box, which will produce thousands of pounds of food for you and your members. The arrival of the season’s seed order will have you wishing for an early spring so you can sow those seeds directly into the soil.

You should plan on spending $1,000 on seed per acre. When ordering your seeds, buy in large quantities to avoid re-ordering more seeds and accruing additional shipping fees. Surplus seed can always be used the following season.

A word of advice: Funky heirloom varieties are beautiful and delicious, but at the beginning you must focus on brute force crops, such as kale, chard, lettuce greens, squash, beets, broccoli, tomatoes, carrots, etc. Exotic melons, eggplant and pumpkins are wonderful, but if you are limited in acreage and your soil is not yet nutrient-rich, do not promise those items to your members in your first season.

Infrastructure

Certain items are essential in your first CSA season. If you are lucky, you may have a few of these
items kicking around; otherwise, they should be acquired with membership dollars as early in the year as possible.

At minimum, invest in the following: cold frames and/or a small-scale greenhouse; a rototiller (or consider hiring someone with a tractor, plow, disc and harrow to prepare your garden plots); large coolers for the delivery of produce; seedling trays; lumber to build a washing station; salad spinners; and packaging materials such as lettuce bags, rubber bands, storage totes, paper bags and/or boxes (Uline.com is a great source for these things). Relying on recycled materials and DIY projects will save money, and it has the added bonus of keeping your farm looking like a rustic homestead.

Harvest and delivery

Schedule at least one on-farm pickup to allow members to observe their membership fees at work and enjoy the scenery.

Harvest no more than four days per week; your plants need the rest, and you will need the remaining three days to get caught up on other farm-related tasks and projects.

If you decide to deliver your shares to a larger nearby community, pick a convenient location with ample parking. Allow at least a 90-minute window during the late afternoon for pickup. Driving to deliver your shares will result in more work, and a delivery fee is warranted.

Shares

Weekly shares will vary in diversity and quantity depending on the time of year and Mother Nature. You should aim to provide five to seven items early in the season, and eight to 15 items come fall.

Strive to deliver one to three salad greens, at least two cooking greens (collards, Swiss chard, kale), two varieties of root vegetables (carrots, beets, potatoes), one to three fruiting vegetables (tomatoes, corn, squash), at least one allium (onions, garlic), two brassicas (broccoli or cabbage), and as many herbs as possible at the peak of your production.

It is important to pay close attention to succession planting guides to keep these crops readily available throughout the season.

Managing cash flow

Even with careful budgeting, it will be difficult for a new CSA farmer to rely solely on membership funds to make it through that first season. Look for other options for alternate sources of income.

You can allocate at least 25 percent of your crop production for weekly sales to local chefs, retail outlets or roadside farm stands. If your crop yields are abundant, take on new members midway through the season at a prorated price. If you have the ambition, sell baked goods, pestos and salsas. Don’t be afraid to raise moderate amounts of small-scale livestock; having a few critters around will create value-added meat and egg sales, and will also provide organic fertilizer for the gardens.

Running a CSA is not just about growing veggies six months out of the year, it is about staying creative and running a viable business. Without proper management of cash flow, failure is likely.

Conclusion

Good food comes from good farms, and good farms come from good people. Your CSA members are not only subscribing to your farm, they are subscribing to you, the farmer. Be sure to articulate both financial and holistic goals to your community members and take clear action toward reaching those goals.

Your commitment to the land and the service you provide will be reflected in the quality of your product, winning the hearts of your community members, and ultimately ensuring success.

Nathan was well-known for his love of farming, local food, Gloucestershire Old Spot hogs, connecting with people, and his wife and family.