

MARKETING

Community Supported Agriculture - A Growing Concept

By Molly Ames

"Community Supported Agriculture" farms, or CSA's, have been around for over a decade in the Northeast. The "traditional" CSA involves a vegetable grower offering to "shareholders" an entire season's supply of vegetables at a fixed price, which is pre-paid early in the year. But the CSA concept has expanded beyond this in several ways.

The first CSA's were organized by growers themselves, but nowadays CSA's are sometimes organized by non-profit organizations, churches, or groups of consumers, who then recruit the farmer to grow for them. Some CSA's now offer meat, eggs, maple syrup, cider, fresh flowers and dairy products. They may also offer more flexible methods of payment including bartering labor for products. CSA's can involve shareholders in ways that go far beyond weeding, and the rewards go both ways.

MIRACLES BY THE ACRE: ONE CSA WITH MULTIPLE GROWERS

Here in the North Country of New York State, growers are creating some really interesting variations on the CSA theme. One example can be found in Jefferson County, New York. Here a small group of growers, all women, have joined forces in a CSA called "Miracles By The Acre."

Miracles By The Acre was organized through a Community Food Security Project sponsored by Cornell Cooperative Extension of Jefferson County, and is now finishing up its third year of marketing fresh produce. Shares include vegetables, cider, fresh cut flowers and herbs that are grown on 6 different farms with a central collection and distribution location.

One of the Miracles growers, Delta Keeney, handles the accounting with the help of another grower, Janet Schrader. They track what produce each grower contributes and how much they will be paid. "I used to just give away my produce because I was not big enough to do a market by myself," says Janet, who had a large family garden with extra produce at certain times of the year. Now Janet is paid for that produce.

Delta says that one of the advantages of multiple growers is that when one grower's lettuce is late, another's might be early. Or, as can happen, if one grower's tomatoes get blossom-end rot, another grower can come to the rescue. It allows growers to grow what they grow best, while having another grower back them up. "So, for instance, Almata Grandjean is our main sweet corn supplier and I am her backup," says Delta.

Miracles by the Acre has developed some really innovative marketing strategies. Through Cornell Cooperative Extension, they partnered with the Healthy Heart Program, a public health initiative aimed at encouraging healthier lifestyles among the employees of participating businesses. The Healthy Heart Program purchased 36 CSA shares and distributed them to employees as an incentive to make healthy lifestyle changes. Shares that were not picked up were donated to local food pantries.

In this way, over 500 families were exposed to the concept of a CSA and the delicious advantages of fresh, local produce. Other shares were purchased by repeat customers for home consumption and by some local churches that contributed their shares to food pantries.

"Taking it one step further," says Delta Keeney, "we established a new Farmers' Market in the City of Watertown." The Market Board consists of the original six farmers that make up Miracles. This market is located in a neighborhood that had limited access to fresh fruits and vegetables. Sometimes it was even called the forgotten neighborhood, because it has so few stores yet is so strongly residential.

Jennifer Zamarripa, a young mother who doesn't own a car, says she likes the market because it's so close to her home. "Easily three quarters of our buyers walk here," says Kathleen Mielke, one of the Miracles growers. Market hours are also unique - it runs from 3 pm until 7pm every Monday. "It is the only market open after work," says Gail Millard who also sells at the other city markets. All vendors at this market accept WIC and Senior Farmer Market Nutrition Program coupons.

The market only offers fresh and local produce, no crafts. "If it isn't edible, we don't sell it," says Gail. Aisha Miller, a young mother from Ft. Drum Military Base, comes to all the markets but likes this one "because it has so much fruit." Michelle Stuck, a young mother, likes the market "because the produce is fresher and healthier than what I can get in the supermarket."



CSA members receive a weekly box of farm-fresh produce.

Photos by Odette Butler

ADIRONDACK ENTERPRISES CSA: ONE GROWER, MULTIPLE ENTERPRISES

In a different CSA located further north in St. Lawrence County, farmer Steve Johnson is also expanding the CSA concept. His farm, known as Adirondack Enterprises, is located about 15 miles south of Canton, NY. Shareholders in Steve's CSA not only receive vegetables, but also meat, eggs, and maple syrup. His season goes until December at present and he hopes to add a cold frame to extend the season even further.

Steve is willing to be creative in how shareholders pay for their shares. Working members can do more than just pull weeds — two shareholders are delivering shares in exchange for their produce. Steve says, "I have need of people who can help! Someone to help with writing the newsletter and gathering recipes to include in the share boxes, the design and production of tags for syrup, eggs and vegetables are all things I would love to get off my plate! These are time-consuming activities and if I can find someone to help with them, I can continue to expand other enterprises."

Steve's weekly CSA newsletter describes what growing conditions are affecting the produce, what has gone wrong and what has gone right — things that consumers are usually unaware of. All these efforts get



Miracles By The Acre went on to establish a new Farmers' Market in the City of Watertown, NY.

members involved in the whole farm and help them understand the growing cycle and other aspects of farming.

As a bonus, Steve gets some creative help with talents and skills he might lack, while sharing his experience and knowledge of farming with folks who want to get involved in farming but may not know how. For example Steve's farm has a flock of hens that is big enough to supply the CSA shares first and then a farmer's market in Canton. Steve says that if someone were interested in managing the flock, he would be willing to allow them to expand it, while using him for guidance, and build on the existing egg market he's already established. Similarly, his farm has a flock of sheep and a herd of beef that have potential for expansion if someone has the interest and the time.

"Marketing concepts are as diverse and creative as the farmers and customers that get involved in thinking them up!"

BENNETT'S FARM CSA: "SUBSCRIPTION CHICKEN"

Brian and Ann Bennett, whose farm is also located in St. Lawrence County, have been selling at Canton's farmers market several years. Now they offer a form of a CSA they call "subscription chicken," and it has been an interesting venture.

Bennett's started at market with eggs and lots of garlic. Then they began to bring their free-range chicken to market, selling whole and half chickens out of a cooler. They soon found that there was a demand for chicken and eggs that went beyond the market.

In some CSAs, customers visit the farm to pick up their weekly shares. These visits are part of the CSA experience and help customers feel connected to the farm. But on other farms like the Bennett's, it may be too hard or too far to get customers to come to the farm. Making the connection to the farm in other ways becomes part of the marketing strategy. It has been easy enough for the Bennetts to offer delivery services to their customers located in the

village close to market. So a cooler left out on your porch will be filled with chicken, eggs and garlic on ice when you get home from work.

Responding to what customers want and being willing to oblige has created another marketing opportunity at Bennett's. Some customers buy day old chicks and then Brian raises them, providing the care and feeding up to the weight the customer wants. Some people prefer bigger heavier roasters. Some like smaller frying chicken and many want a mix of everything in between. Brian wants to oblige. He charges by the pound, so the heavier the bird, the more money it costs the customer at the end but they get exactly what they want. Well, if all goes well they do.

The subscription cost covers the cost of raising the bird, the feed and overhead, and hopefully generates a profit for the farm. It generally costs less than what customer would pay for a similar product in a health food store or food coop. The



Flowers and melons from Miracles By The Acre.

Bennett's "subscription chicken" sells for \$1.50 per pound but in addition, the consumer pays the up-front cost of the bird and assumes some of the risk.

Brian has expanded the concept in another way. He already has a market for meat chicken all dressed and ready to eat. But he has found that there are also customers out there who want to buy birds to take home at two week of age, to their own farm or backyard. This gets them beyond the "tricky" stage. Brian often advises them on raising the birds themselves. Sometimes he may help process the birds if his buyers needs the advice and support.

Cont. on next page