



## As a grower sees it – getting to grips with growing vegetables

By Tim Deane, Northwood Farm, Devon

What is a CSA scheme – is it a business, or a way for its members to take control of an important aspect of their lives? Or both?

Westcountry CSAs currently in existence or development span a wide spectrum from existing or developing vegetable growing enterprises which are seeking community support in order to help sustain them into the future, to groups of private individuals who intend to produce their own crops by managing a piece of land communally, possibly without any previous experience other than gardening.

In all cases the point is to assure a positive connection between the production of food and its consumption, involving the member in more or less directly supporting that production and in having some collective influence on its nature, means and quality.

It should go without saying that the work of a CSA needs to be directed in an organised and effective manner so that the results are not disproportionate to the effort and other resources applied. Members' initial enthusiasm may not survive a succession of patchy harvests or a supply of produce which requires severe remedial action in the kitchen.

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The above suggests that the work of the CSA should be at least businesslike. For those who have no experience of commercial growing – how is “growing” different to “gardening”? The only absolute similarity between them is that they both involve growing plants. The range of differences is encapsulated in the statement:

‘Gardening is a leisure activity, growing a matter of life and death.’

This is figuratively true, if not literally accurate.

A business is dependent on earning more than it spends. It is hard to make money growing vegetables – our society puts little value on food, and then there are the effects of competition from better soils, easier climates, greater mechanisation and/or cheaper labour. It is very easy to lose it – drought, flood, frost, pests and diseases.

To counteract these tendencies and grow vegetables effectively on any scale as little as possible should be left to chance. The following all help -

- A vision of what the holding should look like, so that you know what you are working towards.
- Know what needs doing, or find out.
- Realise that some of this can and should be planned, but that some of it will be forced on you.
- Frequent and regular observation – plants are live stock too!
- Understand the response of the soil to your activity on/in it.
- Ready access to the necessary equipment and/or the labour force to do the job.
- Good timing is all (“never put off until tomorrow what can be done today”).
- Keep good records and keep them up to date.