

Canalside Community Food

History and operation	
Approach	Community-led initiative
Established	2007
Location	Radford Semele, near Leamington Spa
Products, services and prices	Vegetable bags weekly Large / small / mini £58.50 / £39 / £26 – per month Fruit share trial (autumn 2011) 1-2 (or more) types per week £20 – per month
Membership	£2 (£1) / month
Holiday arrangements	No refunds
Payment	Monthly by standing order; 2 month notice period to cancel order
Work contribution	3x3hr work shifts requested / year
Distribution	2 pick-up points: farm and town (£2.20/month extra)
Production	Wide range of vegetables grown throughout the year; fruit production from 2011
Trade	Only honey, mushrooms, flour and apple juice are bought in for sale to members

Overview

Canalside Community Food aims "to provide fresh, organic, seasonal, locally grown fruit and vegetables and to involve local people in the process of producing the food they eat."

Canalside has a strong ethos of providing its subscribers' vegetable shares entirely from the enterprise's own production and has successfully supplied vegetable shares every week since the summer of 2007. Canalside now supplies around 130 shares a week, working to the capacity of the organically certified 8 acres it cultivates at Leasowe Farm, comprising 7 acres of field crops and 6 polytunnels.

Community engagement in the production of food is of great importance to Canalside and members are encouraged to visit the farm, offer volunteer labour and take part in numerous social events through the year.

With the help of a grant from the Local Food Fund, fruit production started in 2009 and a small number of subscribers receive fruit during the season, currently supplemented by local surpluses. A small amount of additional produce is available to members to buy including shiitake mushrooms and wholemeal flour from Leasowe Farm, and local honey and apple juice.

Key indicators

Human capital	
Regular volunteers	33
Volunteers / member	0.25
Employees	1 full time, 4 part time, some paid seasonal labour
Employees / acre	0.25
Social capital	
Legal structure	Company limited by guarantee
Governance	Management committee elected from and by members
Members	Approx 130 subscribers + 30 social members
Length of membership	1 year
Natural capital	
Land worked	8 acres
Tenure of land	Wholly rented with 5-10 year lease
Improvements to land	Increases to: diversity of production, land managed under organic principles, number of hedges and trees, wildlife areas, accessibility
Physical capital	
Buildings	Rented / owned
Equipment	Tractor rented from farm; delivery vehicle borrowed; all other equipment owned.
Financial capital	
Turnover	Approximately £55,000
Turnover / member	Approximately £425
Reserves	n/a

History

The origins of Canalside Community Food date back to 2005, when Tom and Caz Ingall, who had recently moved back to Leasowe Farm, first discussed setting up a CSA initiative with Judy Steele, from the local Agenda 21 Environmental Action Group, and Gareth Davies from Garden Organic, based at nearby Ryton Gardens.

Canalside Community Food was founded as a company limited by guarantee in 2006 following a public meeting attended by 80 people. Production started in early 2007 on 7 acres of land leased to Canalside by Leasowe Farm and previously used for a pig co-operative which provided

pork to its members and helped prepare the land for cultivation.

Labour was largely voluntary in the first couple of years though with some paid employees from the start of production. Horticultural mentoring and advice was provided by Garden Organic and Tom volunteered at Ryton Gardens to learn about organic horticulture. Start-up capital was provided through a soft loan of £10,000 from a member of the community. The loan is being paid off over 5 years, sharing the start-up costs between all users during this period.

Canalside started supplying vegetable shares in the summer of 2007, initially to 60 subscribers. In 2009 a grant from the Local Food Fund allowed Canalside to plant soft fruit plants and top fruit trees.

Operation

Canalside now produces the equivalent of around 130 small shares each week, along with additional trial shares and sales of around 10% of all produce to local outlets.

Canalside is a separate entity from Leasowe Farm, working on leased land. However, the relationship is strong and mutually beneficial. Canalside enjoys security of tenure and is able to make use of the farm's infrastructure, including tractors, other farm equipment, and a modern barn for storage of crops through the winter. Leasowe Farm benefits from having a responsible tenant and the relationship with Canalside's members: farm produce such as organic shiitake mushrooms and stoneground flour is available to members to buy.

Canalside has a strong ethos of producing all the vegetables for the members' shares on the farm and has successfully provided its members with a range of produce every week since the initiative started in 2007. This is seen as an important selling point – the publicity leaflet carries the slogan “All your veg grown on our farm” – and follows the wishes expressed by the membership. Will, the grower, also sees it as a benefit in presenting the challenging but rewarding opportunity to produce as wide a range of produce as possible throughout the year.

A limited number of seasonal fruit shares have recently been offered between late August and the end of November, providing a weekly share of one, two or three (or more) types of fruit. Until the fruit trees come into full production, additional fruit is harvested from local gardens, making use of unwanted surpluses.

Canalside engages very successfully with its members: around half are regularly involved beyond simply collecting their produce share, though Tom would love to see even more participating.

Most subscribers visit the farm weekly to pick up their vegetables from the Canalside yurt, and can take the opportunity to walk around the polytunnels and fields or to join one of the regular volunteer work sessions, taking

place every Wednesday and Saturday to coincide with the pick-ups. Subscribers are asked to contribute at least 9 hours of voluntary work each year and a limited number of workshare subscribers work 3 or 4 hours a week in return for a large or small share.

“ *Community comes first at Canalside – it's significant that community comes before food in the name Canalside Community Food.*

Abbie, assistant grower

A rich calendar of social events takes place on and off the farm during the year. Recent events have included a craft and camping weekend (the main autumn event, including craft, cabaret and potato harvesting), an earth oven weekend (installing a bread oven in the pole barn, also recently erected with the help of members) and a “tree-bog workshop” (installing two large composting toilets in a wooden building).

“ *Working on the farm is a fantastic experience - being out on the hillside, working alongside other members and knowing that you've played a part in the food that we subsequently collect and eat. There is a real community feel to Canalside and I love attending the social events, meeting other members, sharing food and sitting round the fire.*

Canalside share subscriber and volunteer

The location of Leasowe Farm has proved of great benefit. The farm is close to the adjoining towns of Leamington Spa (3 miles, population c40,000) and Warwick (5 miles, population c25,000), allowing members easy access to the farm for their weekly vegetable share pick-up, volunteering and social events.

The farm is also close to the Ryton Gardens, the organic demonstration garden of Garden Organic (formerly the Henry Doubleday Research Association) which as well as giving invaluable horticultural advice to Canalside in its early days has provided use of its heated greenhouses for raising of plants from seed.

With an ambition for as closed a production system as possible, Canalside is now hoping to move to raising plants in its own polytunnels, as well as saving more seed over time and reducing the dependence on organic muck from a nearby livestock farm for fertility.

From the beginning Canalside has enjoyed a close relationship with The Veggie Table, a community café in Leamington Spa. Around 70% of the Veggie Table's vegetables are sourced from Canalside, in the form of several large weekly shares. The café considers itself a showcase for healthy and sustainable vegetarian cuisine, and for Canalside produce in particular. The café venue serves as a satellite pick-up point, also providing a

presence for Canalside in the town and representing the initial point of contact for some members.

The number of vegetable share subscribers is fairly constant at 130, Canalside's capacity. Though shares could be reduced (more subscribers complain about receiving too much than too little) or more land taken on (the farm has land available), Tom would prefer to see Canalside concentrate on continuing to improve what it's doing rather than focusing on growth at the possible expense of the sense of community. His hope is that Canalside will provide a model of good practice to inspire and inform further CSA initiatives.

Natural turnover of subscribers does require continual recruitment. After a period of little active marketing a recent publicity drive, including leafleting by members, attracted several new members. A trial scheme was recently introduced allowing potential subscribers to sign up for 4 weeks before fully committing. Canalside does not operate a waiting list – experience in the first year suggested that asking potential members to wait often put them off altogether – but manages numbers flexibly.

Impact

Canalside successfully provides vegetables from its own production every week of the year to its subscribers, currently numbering around 130. 63% of subscribers¹ have all or nearly all of their household requirements met by their share; the remaining 37% have about half their requirements met.

A smaller amount of fruit, from the farm and local surplus production, is provided to a limited number of subscribers. Canalside also provides an outlet for other local and farm produce.

Canalside's members report significant individual impacts, particularly on their shopping, eating and cooking habits:

- 81% say their overall quality life has improved through membership;

“ I have made a lot of friends though the CSA. I value the opportunity to be outdoors in a rural area doing physical work, with nice people. I feel very happy to know exactly where my food comes from and how it is produced.

- 54% say their overall health has improved;

“ We eat a wider range of salad and green vegetables since joining Canalside. And working on the farm is very invigorating and good exercise!

- 46% say their skills have increased;

“ Communication, social awareness, knowledge of how to grow our own food.

- 85% say their cooking or eating habits have changed;

“ We cook what we get so everything is seasonal, the ingredients decide the dish.

- 77% say their other shopping habits have changed;

“ Reduction in supermarket visits - reduced need to go to a 'shop' so less purchases of anything from supermarket. Other shopping has become easier to do in smaller local outlets.

Canalside provides volunteering opportunities at least twice a week, attracting over 30 regular volunteers, and employs 2 permanent members of staff. Canalside also runs an educational programme, offering farm visits to local school children.

Many subscribers, social members, volunteers and employees are engaged in the farm's social activities, which often revolve around seasonal events on the farm (such as potato harvesting) or rural crafts and skills (such as installing a compost toilet or building a pole barn).

Lessons

- A close relationship with the farm proved hugely beneficial: providing security of tenure, flexible use of land, access to infrastructure;
- The farm's accessibility to a large population was an important factor in achieving and securing the target membership;
- A good relationship with nearby Ryton Gardens provided necessary expertise at first and continuing facilities for plant raising, avoiding the need to buy in plants;
- Initial lack of experience in horticulture was overcome through selective use of expert advice and an openness to learning;
- A close relationship with community cafe The Veggie Table provided an accessible pick-up point in Leamington Spa and a continuing publicity opportunity;
- Community engagement is a critical factor in Canalside's success, providing members with more than just vegetables;
- Members, staff and volunteers of Canalside show a remarkably consistent dedication to the concept of CSA and a desire to see the movement spread and grow.

¹ n=27 (Canalside members responding to our members' survey)

The impact of community supported agriculture: final report
Soil Association CSA Project, Making Local Food Work