



A case study of Swillington Organic Farm

Summary

A 50-share vegetable CSA scheme based near Leeds, West Yorkshire, in a 2 acre walled garden. Members sign up for 12 months, at £614 for a full share, and £372 for a half share. One full-time grower is contract employed. Budgetary and planting decisions are made by the landowner.

Swillington Organic Farm

Swillington Organic Farm is a 160 acre mixed livestock farm producing beef, pork, lamb, mutton, goat, chicken, duck and turkey which is sold through the on-site farm shop, local farmers' markets and local restaurants. The farm has been organic since 1997, and has been run by Jo Cartwright since 1975. She took over from her mother who took on the farm in 1952. It is located about 5 miles to the south east of Leeds, in an area of former mining villages, and with good transport connections.

Why CSA?

The farm is part of a former country estate belonging to the Lowther family and includes a walled garden which was tended by up to 20 gardeners in its hey-day. More recently, due to the amount of time needed just to run the farm, the garden fell into a semi-derelict state, producing a very limited amount of vegetables for sale in the farm shop.

When they heard about the CSA concept, they thought it could help them achieve their objectives:

- To make full use of the garden
- To involve more local people in the garden and the farm as a whole
- To create work opportunities in horticulture for local people
- To provide capital (profits if any) to be reinvested into the restoration of the walls

Getting started

After hearing about CSA for the first time in 2006, Jo and her colleague Kirstin, spent several months talking to existing customers at the farm shop, explaining the concept and gauging their reaction. It was overwhelmingly positive, so they applied for Community Champions funding to pay for a group of them including Jo, a potential grower, and two customers, to visit Wester Lawrenceton and Earthshare CSA near Inverness. On the way back they made the decision to go ahead with their own project, and drew up a business plan and provisional budget.

Planning

The grower estimated that he would be able to produce 35 shares in the first year, based on the condition of the garden at the time – the weed burden was heavy, fencing poor, and the majority of the land untilled. A lot of time needed to be spent improving the garden's basic infrastructure.

As a group they totalled the amount of money they would need to produce fruit and vegetables in the garden for one year, including the grower's salary of £7.50 an hour, for 40 hours per week. They divided this by 35 to reach the cost of a full share. Jo made no charge for using the garden during the first year and in addition buys 5 weekly shares to supply the farm shop with vegetables.

They decided to charge more than half for half shares to encourage individuals to buy full shares, and then sharing the produce with a friend if there was too much for them to eat. This enabled them to keep the total number of shares being processed to a minimum, in order to reduce the administration of the scheme which was being done on a voluntary basis.

They wanted to encourage as many people as possible to join the scheme, and so it was important that cost was no barrier. They accepted payments by monthly standing order, albeit at an increased cost. They discussed offering 'work shares' but agreed that during the first couple of years they needed the cash in order to cover costs, and that work shares would be a longer-term goal.

The scheme still contract employs one full-time grower, and all the other work including administering the scheme, social events and publicity etc is done on a voluntary basis by other members of the committee and scheme members.

Structure of the CSA

Initially they based their CSA along similar lines to Stroud Community Agriculture. They intended that the scheme would be run by a committee, which during the set-up period, would comprise of the 5 people who had visited Scotland. The scheme would rent the land from Jo, the farmer and landowner, and contract the grower, Ian Downham.

They adopted a constitution based on Stroud Community Agriculture's, though the landowner and grower held permanent positions on the committee, whilst the others were to be re-elected by the membership at least once every three years. The landowner enjoyed the right of veto over all decision-making.

In accordance with the Constitution, they held an AGM in November 2007, at which two members of the committee stepped down, and a new treasurer was elected.

They decided to operate as an unincorporated community group for the first year, to give themselves time to learn more about the various legal structures, and to work out what would suit best.

Marketing

Back on the farm they held open days, farm walks and a public meeting to recruit members.

They presented the scheme as an opportunity for members to

- Source local, organic food
- Learn growing skills through volunteering in the garden
- Become more involved in the farm as a whole through farm walks...
- Support their local farm business

They described it variously as an allotment for people who didn't have time or space for their own or a box scheme paid for up front to ease the farmer's cash flow!

It was a hard sell, as members were not going to receive anything at all for the first three months – not until the scheme started would there be a grower to put seeds in the ground, so there was to harvest for quite a while. That so many people joined in light of this was a real confidence boost.

Local newspapers provided valuable coverage which brought a lot of new people on board. By early March they had enough members to contract the grower and get started. By April, they had sold all the 35 shares for that year.

Year 2

At the AGM in November of the first year, they sought feedback from members. The vast majority were committed to renewing into year 2. Those who didn't live too far away for collection to be convenient.

It was felt they urgently needed to incorporate in order to limit liability, but as the landowner was unable to issue them with a tenancy agreement (due to her mortgage agreement) they were unable to incorporate as a separate body and stay at the same site. In addition, they realised they weren't really operating as a community-led CSA, as only one member (the treasurer) was interested in being involved in running the scheme. The number of volunteers offering to help out in the garden had been dropping steadily, a real cause for concern and action.

The best option therefore was to run the CSA as a not-for-profit enterprise within the privately-run, limited by guarantee farm company, owned by Jo Cartwright. The membership was invited to a Special General Meeting to discuss the need for these changes and to vote them in. Swillington CSA is now run as a producer-led CSA – the landowner administers the scheme, collecting subscription fees from members, and contracting a grower to produce the fruit and vegetables boxes.

Communication

Members are encouraged to offer feedback and influence the way the garden is managed. They pick up their boxes on Fridays and Saturdays, which gives them the opportunity to speak with the grower and provide feedback on a week-to-week basis. They communicate with their members via e-mail, which is also used to distribute their newsletter, and for receiving feedback.

Members are also encouraged to offer skill-sharing sessions – e.g. rag rug-making workshop, Transition Town talks etc.

Social events

They hold social events on the first Saturday each month. This is usually focused around a seasonal activity, such as potato planting/harvesting, scarecrow-making, harvest celebration and bonfire night. They hope that this encourages members to take a more active role in the CSA; next year they plan to organise more skill-share workshops, and publish a database for members to access.

Vegetable production

In year 2 the budget allowed for a new 50ft polytunnel, increasing their protected cropping area to around 3000 sq.ft. So far they've tried to produce everything needed for the boxes, and this year even planted an extra acre of potatoes outside the walled garden, using a contractor.

They are currently discussing cropping plans for the future and it is probably that bulky staples such as potatoes, carrots and onions will be bought in from other local growers leaving Ian to concentrate on high-value crops such as salads and soft fruit.

The grower harvests the produce every Friday morning and puts the veg in the CSA shed. He writes the contents of a full and half share on a board in the shed, and members weigh them out and pack their own boxes. Next year they plan to offer more pick-your-own options, for herbs, salads and flowers, partly to optimise freshness, and partly to free the grower up to spend more time growing.

Some members made a request for boxes to be delivered to the door, but as one of the main objectives is to encourage more people onto the farm, they thought this would be counterproductive. The majority of members enjoy collecting their shares and spending some time in the garden. This also provides them with an element of choice over their box contents, as any veg they don't like, they can swap for something in the gift box.

The future

In the future they intend to extend to a maximum of 60 shares, as the land available is limited. They plan to plant fruit trees to cover the wall, including ones which require protection, such as figs and grapes. They'd like to see more members from Swillington, the nearby village, join the scheme, and would like to support new schemes starting in the area.

www.swillingtonorganicfarm.co.uk