



OCCOMBE FARM COMMUNITY AGRICULTURE CASE STUDY

Devon

Introduction

The Occombe Farm CSA, part of the wider Torbay Countryside and Coast Trust (TCCT), will see its first season of operation this year. Occombe Community Agriculture works on a 4 acre site and provides organic vegetables to its 25 members through a weekly box scheme. The scheme employs one full time grower, and offers a Work Based Diploma in Horticulture to six trainee growers, who are offered free accommodation on site. There is a group of about 30 who volunteer regularly.

One Planet Food Project

The TCCT is an independent charity dedicated to looking after some of Torbay's most important wildlife and heritage sites, aiming to protect land, conserve nature and strengthen the bonds between the people and the natural world of Torbay. Occombe Community Agriculture was set up as part of a Local Food funded project called One Planet Food Project – which is a three year project that aims to promote sustainable food-growing and cooking in and around Torbay. The project also includes a Community Kitchen housing educational cooking sessions, and a kitchen garden demonstrating vegetable growing to the general public.

The inspiration to develop a CSA came from staff within the community garden, the wider Trust and the aims of the One Planet Food Project - so is farm led but has established community involvement.

The main aims of the CSA are to promote local, organic and sustainable food, and provide food-growing learning opportunities – through volunteering, traineeships, workshops, member's events and training courses. The scheme expects to provide 25 individuals or families with an organic, locally produced weekly vegetable box and will provide and promote opportunities for these members to get involved directly in the food growing.

Getting started

TCCT employed a full time grower from October 2009 to organise the set up of the whole project, including the CSA. Start-up help was also sought from many different experts, including organic grower Tim Deane, CSA Regional Development Co-ordinator for the SW Traci Lewis, and Debbie Stewart. Initial groundwork began on 1st March 2010 on the Occombe Farm community garden, which has over one year been turned from a pig field into a beautiful, inspiring community garden brimming with organic vegetables in raised beds, two polytunnels and ground bed growing. The community garden also has a war time allotment / Dig for Victory garden and fledgling forest garden. The scheme employs a full time grower, who has been successful in securing sponsorship from companies such as Suttons Seeds, Elsoms Seeds, Burgon and Ball, EcoSci, Fentongollan, Water Wand, and various other companies who have offered seeds, tools, and other resources.

Six trainee growers are based at the farm over two years, studying a Work Based Diploma in Horticulture, and cover most of the horticultural work throughout the week. For this they receive a training allowance of £50 per week, plus an extra £360 at the end of their placement if they complete it. They also have free accommodation on site and

have a £500 training budget, £350 of which is available for them to choose courses (the other £150 being spent on compulsory courses).

In addition to the 30 regular volunteers working on the CSA, there is also additional, occasional input from others working on similar growing projects locally.

Members and membership

Initially the production capacity is only for 25 members, (this includes both families and individuals), based in the local Torbay area. But as the project develops, production will increase. There is no separate membership fee, as individuals are already offered the chance to become members of TCCT, or Ocombe Farm, and separate membership was considered potentially confusing. The CSA plans to increasingly involve members through regular, practical work days, where they will join the Growers in growing activities. Many of those who have signed up as CSA members are regular volunteers already. Food growing related workshops and courses will also be offered to members as well as celebration events. Member involvement will include some level of input into ideas of crop choice, variety of vegetables and courses. The level of input will develop with the CSA through feedback forms, discussions, emails and members meetings.

Current members are motivated by their desire to eat locally sourced, organic food at a low cost (£10 per week for a veg box), as well as wanting to learn to grow food in a social environment and become involved with Ocombe farm.

The produce and sharing the harvest

The CSA produces a wide selection of vegetables from the four main crop types: fruits, roots, legumes, brassicas. Within each of the four main types the group grow different varieties, and aim for successional sowing / planting when possible in order to grow crops for as long as is feasible. Fruit trees and bushes and herb beds in the Community garden may be offered as extras to the CSA produce, dependent on how much is produced. A fledgling forest garden will hopefully be a source of produce but not in abundance for at least another five years. Quantities of vegetables were planned last year when the CSA was first drafted in order to calculate requirements, and seeds were purchased from organic suppliers approved by the Soil Association. Produce is harvested by the trainees and laid out in the packing shed ready to be packed by members of the CSA when they collect weekly on Friday afternoons / Saturday mornings. Members either make one payment for the nine months of the CSA scheme or pay by standing order in three instalments which can be cancelled with three months' notice. As an incentive to pay at the beginning, if paying £400 up front, they will receive a free vegetable box at the end of the season.

Funding and admin

Torbay Coast and Countryside Trust were given £475,000 from the Local Food Fund and other charitable trusts to set up the One Planet Food Project. Ocombe Community Agriculture is intending to fund the continuation of the One Planet Food Project beyond the funding period, which ends in June 2012. The money has been spent on infrastructure, including the community kitchen and office space, polytunnels, a packing shed and hard landscaping of raised beds. A portion of it also goes towards the ongoing costs of seeds, compost and manure. All work relating to administration, legal work, finances and promotion work will be carried out by the growers rather than any of the CSA members.

Legal Structure

Due to the CSA's role within a larger organisation, insurance is covered through the

TCCT and the CSA is not set up as a separate legal entity, which helped reduce start-up difficulties.

Land and structures

Occombe Community Agriculture works on a 4 acre site allocated to the CSA from the farm's existing land, which meant the group didn't have to deal with renting or purchasing. The land - formerly a pig field - is divided up roughly into two sections. One half is the Community Garden which was established last year and contains the polytunnels, war-time allotment and forest garden. The second half is used for the CSA where the main crops are grown on one patch divided into four sections on one acre and the other is sown with green manure, mainly clover. With planning permission successfully obtained, several new structures have been built on-site: as well as the polytunnels, there is a packing shed for storing harvested produce for the CSA and a haulage container for storing equipment. The team appear to be on schedule in terms of planning and planting - they have successfully propagated all their plants so far from seed, without having to buy in anything extra, although it is still early days. Crops have been planned for the first 9 months which will provide 25 members with a weekly vegetable selection.

Community involvement

The Occombe Farm CSA has been running regular volunteer work days on every Thursday and 4th Sunday of the month since the inception of the project. OCA will continue to host these work days and encourage community members along to participate when they can. The project sees its purpose as bringing the community together to learn and enjoy the work done on site and therefore opens its doors to anyone wishing to volunteer at the project.

There are often events at the farm, such as pizza making and baking days using Occombe's cob oven, a beer festival, and general get-togethers to which all volunteers / involved community are invited. When the CSA is up and running, the team endeavour to have more community specific events where the success of the project can be celebrated with the people who are making it happen.

Future

The young CSA has faced a few obstacles so far, including the loss of their chief grower who had to leave her position due to health problems. This resulted in 37+ hours lost, and left the rest of the team "teetering on the edge of 'under control'" due to huge responsibilities. Nevertheless, this was a challenge they are "embracing with open arms, hearts and minds".

They struggled with a serious weed problem on the acre of CSA land and an awkward irrigation system, but have sought advice on specific growing technicalities and have now employed a consultant on a weekly basis to guide the CSA project as a separate entity. Irrigation is being implemented on an ad-hoc DIY basis. Although still struggling with the acquisition of members, the team extended the membership sign up date, are developing their PR and crossing their fingers - "tightly, for at least one hour each day." The group nevertheless view their main achievement as the successful implementation of the whole thing from paper to reality.

The CSA has viewed this year as "almost a trial" and looks forward to next year when they can look back on what has been achieved. The core group hopes to increase membership numbers by next year, however, in the words of one core group member, we're keen not to "carry more eggs in our basket than we already are".

The project as a whole gets great feedback from members of the public, and although it has received some scepticism regarding its "opportunistic CSA outlook", OCA believes

their aims to be completely possible, and will “work, work, work” until they have made the first year the success it needs to be.

Lessons learnt

- Initial planning and organisation needs to be undisrupted and everything needs to be written and available to all persons involved in the development of the project.
- Important to keep information to hand – OCA encountered some obstacles in the form of missing information which detracted hugely from the actually *doing*.

“The One Planet Food Project has expanded so much since its initial conception and it is really amazing to look back and see what has been created in such a short time. We feel this will always be the case here; we’re committed to growing in so many different respects and believe we will always have a close community striving for mutual ideals. Our perpetual encouragement of local society to become involved in our site and in the Trust will benefit Torbay as an entire district. As with many environmental organisations, we are part of a bigger picture, and the more we put in, the more we will get out. Our project will always support a number of entities, and in turn we will always need support to keep on growing. Life is a cycle, and as long as we never detract from our sustainable, local, educational, organic morals, everyone can benefit greatly from it.”

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