

Hazelhurst Fruiterly Case Study

Introduction

An offshoot of an established family-owned company, Hazelhurst Fruiterly is a grower-led CSA based in Sheffield that specialises in growing a wide range of top fruit and soft fruit for members. The CSA owns a three acre (1.3 hectare) piece of land, sloping gently south-east, in the Moss Valley only a mile from the edge of Sheffield. The director of the project, Huw Evans, estimates it will take five years to establish this enterprise as a successful and productive fruit growing business. Two years down the line, the trees and bushes are growing well, are healthy and seem well suited to the site. The hope is to have a small number of members in place by summer 2013, who will be able to access the site at any reasonable hour, and enjoy it as a place 'to be' as well as a place 'to do'.

Getting Started

The original action for the CSA came from the growers – and was inspired by the chapter on 'The right use of land' in *Small is Beautiful* by E F Schumacher. The main aim was to design a place of health, beauty, permanence and productivity that would provide locally grown organic fruit directly to local consumers with very low food miles, and which would increase the diversity of both cropping and wildlife on the land surrounding Sheffield.

After two years of searching for suitable land to purchase, the team found their plot which belonged to a farmer who was keen for it to remain in food production rather than being sold for horse grazing. Huw describes the land as 'a beautiful site, surrounded by mature hedges and trees with lovely views.'

After a further year of work doing a soil survey, soil improvement and design planning with the help of designers 'Reckless Orchard', the site was planted over the winter of 2010/2011. The original plan was to plant many of the trees straight after buying the land, in the winter of 2009/2010 but the team ended up missing the planting season. This turned out to be a blessing in disguise; as all the hard work that went into planning, design and surveys, ordering the right trees and improving the land means that the resulting orchard has far exceeded the yield that would have been produced had the trees had been planted immediately.

It is early days and the CSA is not yet trading, as the fruit trees and bushes will of course take a number of years to come into production, but the growers anticipate using the small quantities of fruit available in the first couple of years to visit farmers' markets and publicise the work being done. Some articles have already been placed in local newsletters from both church groups and neighbourhood groups, and a few seasonal events have been organised including planting days and Easter egg hunts.

Membership

The members will pay a membership fee which will be calculated when the Fruiterly is established and once it is clear how much it costs to maintain. Some work will be done on a voluntary basis, and members will pick their own soft fruit. Fruit planting days have been organised, although these only resulted in a small proportion of trees being planted.

The produce and sharing the harvest

A grower has been employed two days a week since October, for £12/ph, with Huw working closely alongside him. A wide variety of fruits are grown; nearly 30 varieties of apple, 8 of pear, 8 of plum, 6 of blackcurrant, which ensures a varied and long cropping & eating season and reduces vulnerability to crop failures. Produce includes dessert apples, culinary apples, pears, plums, cherries, blackcurrants, redcurrants, whitecurrants, gooseberries, blackberries, raspberries, hybrid berries. Also a small number of more esoteric things like quince, mulberry, medlar, filbert & hazel, damson, cherry plum and walnut. There are bees nearby, which is extremely helpful for pollination purposes. Organic methods have been employed from the beginning, and organic certification was applied for in July 2011.

Legal structure and admin

The land is owned by a family owned limited company, established in 1982. The Fruiterie, although legally part of this company and benefiting from the financial stability that this affords, is regarded as more of a social and environmental enterprise than a profit centre! They'll be happy if it pays its way, and provides a small return on the capital employed.

The major expense is the land itself, closely followed by the cost of establishing organic top fruit and soft fruit on the land over the three years before significant crops can be expected.

The CSA is fortunate to have a good working arrangement with a local farmer, who is willing to use his machinery for the occasional major tasks, such as subsoiling, ploughing and cutting large areas of green manure crops.

Land and structures

The Fruiterie owns three acres of land, and also owns an adjacent nine acre field, which will be occupied from 2012 by a small cluster of organic vegetable growers. So far there is only one structure on the site – a steel shipping container used as a tool store, so there has been no need to apply for planning permission for anything that has been done so far. The land is close enough to the city to establish local food growing enterprises.

Community involvement

Community events and workdays are held at least 4 times a year. There is the possibility of a community-led CSA establishing a vegetable growing project next door to Hazelhurst, as well as a small cluster of other independent organic growers. The CSA also has a relationship with the local Transition Town group. This offers opportunities to co-operate and collaborate with regards to marketing and distribution, as well as providing help and mutual support with growing. The CSA is developing links with the nearest primary and secondary schools – with plans in place to increase the number of visits over the coming years.

Huw describes the benefits of the project as far-reaching. "For me, it has helped me to develop a whole new area of knowledge and skills – and to feel that those skills are something that need to be shared and practised by more people in the future. For the local agricultural community, it shows that people are willing to invest both time and money in re-establishing food growing businesses - reversing to some extent the reduction in the number of people working the land. For the local urban community it offers a way to be involved in where food comes

from, and to understand some of the realities of farming life. For the environment, there should be a small reduction in fruit travelling the motorways of Britain, and the local environment benefits significantly from the switch to organic methods." Huw describes the requirements of the government Organic Entry Level Scheme as only the beginning of what he is planning to do in order to increase biodiversity.

Future

The aim is to have a small number of members by summer 2013, with the number of members increasing rapidly in 2014 and 2015 as the productivity of the trees develops. The group intends to purchase equipment to juice any surplus or graded-out fruit by about 2014. Due to the steady demand in Sheffield for seasonal organic fruit to go into veg boxes - with very little being grown locally - Huw is confident that they could sell via this route as well as directly at farmers' markets if there is any difficulty in recruiting members.

Plans for the immediate future involve the organisation of membership arrangements, the development of publicity materials and the creation of a website, which must be continually maintained in order to motivate visitors to the site to become involved.

Having attended a series of CSA training events organised by the Soil Association in Sheffield and Leeds, and visiting Dragon Orchard on a CSA training day, Huw recognises the benefits of sharing experiences and ideas with others on the same path, and is keen to attend more open days at other organic fruit and vegetable growing businesses working on a similar scale.

Hazelhurst aims to become part of a vibrant local food movement in Sheffield, providing fresh, seasonal produce - including varieties of fruit not available anywhere else in the city - and offering members a long-term link with the source of their fruit and the opportunity to be involved directly with the CSA.

Lessons learnt

"To do it properly takes a lot of time and money".

Huw Evans
Hazelhurst Fruiterie
HuwNEvans@aol.com