

Access to Land for Community Supported Agriculture Projects

Where to start...

Accessing a piece of land to start your CSA project can seem very daunting initially, but when you really start looking, and asking everyone you meet and checking out some of the organisations below, you're very likely to find some suitable land even if it's not ideal. When approaching people for land, it is worth taking the time to prepare your ideas so that when you do start discussing particulars, you're clear about what it is you're looking for and how they can help.

So draw up a business plan, or at the very least an outline of what you plan to do. If you can refer to other groups/schemes in the area which are well-respected, do – this will help give you credibility, and show that you are following a successful precedent.

Decide how much land you need. Look around you – what resources are available.

Back gardens

Back gardens are an often over-looked resource – a lot of people don't have the time, energy or confidence to do much with them, and so simply lawn them over. Why not try approaching neighbours and asking if you can use their gardens to grow fruit and vegetables for your CSA scheme, in return for a share of the produce – they get a box a week, you get the rest to supply your members who don't have their own gardens.

Alternatively garden owners pay you a set fee to install an allotment in their back garden, and a regular payment for maintenance.

Have a look at two back garden CSAs operating in the USA:

- New York Backyard Farmers: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vDxBEU0ImjI>
- www.yourbackyardfarmer.com (Portland, Oregon) – they say a garden of 20'x20' can feed a family of 4.

Allotments

Although demand for allotments is at an all-time high, some sites are sadly neglected. By clearing the land and establishing a productive plot, you would not only increase the fertility and therefore the value of the land, but you would rejuvenate an area which might previously have been used as a fly tipping site, or worse. Present these arguments to the council or allotment association, and try to negotiate a smallholder tenancy agreement, which will give you a longer rental period, and cheaper rate than a standard allotment agreement. There may be funding available to put up fencing and improve the water supply. Many allotments have the advantage of being in residential areas, which should make it easier to attract local people to join your scheme. The allotment CSA could come to form a focus for the whole community.

Another CSA runs a PYO scheme – members pay per individual, and are free to visit the garden whenever they like to harvest whatever they like. This fosters a strong sense of ownership amongst the members, which acts to deter vandals and thieves.

Other urban spaces

Look for land surrounding community halls, churches and offices – by setting up a CSA in their grounds, you could help companies fulfil their Corporate Social Responsibility aims, whilst at the same time supplying their staff with fresh, local fruit and vegetables – a ready market on the doorstep!

The Credit Crunch

The current economic climate has meant that many plots of land previously earmarked for development are sitting idle, waiting for things to pick up. Some groups around the country are taking advantage of this to set up fruit and vegetable plots, or to practice guerrilla gardening. The land often needs to be cleared of huge amounts of rubbish, and may well be contaminated. However, these plots are often situated in residential areas and could provide for a large number of people, if gardened. CSAs work very well in these circumstances, as communities pull together to improve their own environments.

Larger plots of land

Look to the landowners:

- Farmers
- The Church Commissioners for England –
 - Church House, Great Smith Street, London SW1P 3AZ
<http://www.cofe.anglican.org/about/churchcommissioners/>
- Parish, town and city councils
- British Waterways –
 - <http://www.britishwaterways.co.uk/invest-in-waterways/business-opportunities/canalside-small-business-opportunities>,
- or enquiries.hq@britishwaterways.co.uk
- the water boards
- Network Rail - <http://www.networkrail.co.uk/asp/1590.aspx>
- National Parks – funding for projects which develop communities
<http://www.nationalparks.gov.uk/livingin/sustainable-development.htm>
- The National Trust – land is managed regionally, so contact your local office, or for farm tenancies:
 - http://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/main/w-chl/w-countryside_environment/w-food_farming/w-food_farming-tenants_lettings.htm
 - National Trust allotments: http://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/main/w-global/w-news/w-news-further_news/w-news-growing_spaces/w-news-growing_spaces-casestudies.htm
- privately-owned estates

Use connections where possible, however tenuous.

You will need to have a well-written business plan, and if possible a list of people who are committed to your project. The advantage of applying as a Community-Supported Agriculture project is that the project is guaranteed an income from day 1, and will be able to clearly prove that it will self-finance.

Again, your project will add value to the land, and bring people onto the land, which some organisations, such as the National Trust, will see as a benefit to them.

If you are looking to certify the land as organic, it's worth bearing in mind that the conversion period is 2 years. During that time you will not be able to market your produce as organic.

In order to reduce the cost of certification, it may be possible to add the land to a local organic farmer's licence - contact them and ask! It is a big ask, they have to trust that you are farming organically and will do the necessary paperwork, if you don't adhere to the standards, you undermine their organic status, which may incur a fine and suspension from certification.

Landshare scheme

- <http://landshare.channel4.com/>

This website is very successfully bringing people and landowners together all over the UK.

Tenancy agreements

Whatever the area of land you are working with, you may have to put a lot of work into establishing infrastructure and getting the land productive, so it is recommended you have a tenancy agreement, so all parties involved are clear about expectations and responsibilities.

On larger scale projects, and with long-term tenancies, you may wish to consult legal professionals for advice.

Farm tenancies are usually for between 10 and 25 years, whilst farm business tenancies usually last 3-5 years.

For help with your tenancy agreement, contact Ben Raskin at the Soil Association on email: braskin@soilassociation.org

Where risk is minimal (in a backgarden for example) this agreement may be informal, though it is still advised to have it in written form.

If you want to start a CSA, don't let anything stop you! There is plenty of land available, it's just a matter of conveying your vision and enthusiasm to those standing in the way. If they understand the community-supported agriculture concept and its benefits to all, and you are armed with a strong business plan and members, you will be able to make your vision a reality. If you can't get your hands on that perfect piece of land, start with what you've got. Start small and build on your success. Once you have proven that you can make things happen, more doors will open to you.