

Dragon Orchard Crop Sharers

Summary

A crop share scheme, where Cropsharers pay for a share in the yearly apple harvest, orchard products and have seasonal weekend visits. The enterprise is farmer led and provides opportunities for members to enjoy and understand the local landscape and culture.

Full Description

History

The Stanier family have a long history in the area and affection for the distinctive landscape and orchards that shape it. They used to supply a wholesaler with their fruit but this market dried up in favour of large cheap global suppliers because of the short season of the Staniers particular varieties. The Staniers have no cold store and no continuity of supply. They also used to supply a local cider maker with a small portion of the harvest, who took the apples at their precise harvest time. The cider maker was taken over by a larger company whose inflexible processing schedule did not fit with their apple varieties. The Staniers said "the market collapsed and the orchard began to feel like a mill stone round our necks".

Meanwhile, visitors to the farm confirmed that the flavour of the apples and the experience of staying on the farm were wonderful. The Staniers had heard of box schemes and CSA from the Soil Association and they say "suddenly the millstone lifted from our necks, we thought, yes!". Initially, around 12 months were spent discussing the project with various people such as a solicitor, bank advisor and accountant. A brochure was then design and printed and a website set up. The majority of set-up costs were spent on the brochure (£2,500), with the remainder funding the website (£1000) and the Staniers' time. These costs were met by the family. The Cropshare CSA was then launched at the Ludlow Food & Drink Festival in September 2001.

Organisation

The farm operates as a farmer-controlled business, which welcomes cropsharers as visitors and trades with other small local businesses. The Staniers are happy with the way the scheme has run, and have not had any problems, but are considering changing the structure of the scheme to allow further developments such as working more closely with local people. They recognise that not everyone has the disposable income to become a crop-sharer at current prices (although existing crop-sharers consider the cost to represent extremely good value for money). As the Staniers do not want to exclude anyone on the basis of their income, they are considering a workshare scheme whereby people could pay for a proportion of their share through work. This idea has not yet been formalised, but is something they are working towards.

The Staniers are also hoping to encourage more local groups, such as schools, to visit. This has started informally, with, for example, a group who home-educate their children spending a morning visiting and helping with the harvest and going on to see how the apples are juiced elsewhere in the afternoon. Formalising visits like this will involve deciding how much to charge, which is currently being considered.

In 2002, Dragon Orchard Cropsharers reached the final of the NFU Countryside Competition. Recently, they have appeared in Rick Stein's Local Heroes book in which they are described as 'super-heroes'. Now in their third year, they are fine-tuning their set-up and working to involve the wider community.

Finance

Cropsharers pay £300 per year (or £275 for existing crop-sharers) for weekend visits and a share in the harvest comprising of:

eating apples: 2 x 30lb box of different varieties
cooking apples: 2 x 30lb box
pears: 10lb tray
single variety apple juice: 1 dozen bottles
table cider: 1 dozen bottles
home made apple chutney and plum jam

The scheme has been adjusted to allow for more flexibility in what products people receive so cropsharers can now arrange, for example, to have less fresh fruit and more cider or juice.

Approximately half the share price goes towards the orchard produce, the other half being spent the 4 weekend visits per year (one of which is a 3-day bank holiday weekend) at which a main meal and tea and coffee are served daily.

In the first season there were 30 Cropsharers. This number has risen towards 40, which represents about 120-125 people, and the ideal number of cropsharers to grow to will be about 100. As numbers rise there will need to be some adjustment to the weekend visits if the Staniers are not to be overwhelmed. This may mean running 6 events per year and letting cropsharers come to any 4 so as to spread the load involved. Numbers will eventually be restricted in order to retain the quality of the experience.

Almost all of the cropsharers renewed after the first year. Members are very mixed, with lots of families and the active retired. Single cropsharers tend to share their share with a friend, relative or neighbour. The oldest cropsharer is 95, and the youngest are babies. Membership is wide-ranging, with 18 retired members, 30 family-members from older families (teenagers tend not to attend many weekends but do consume produce!), 8 adults with 8-10 children from younger families, 10 couples and 7 single people. Around half of the cropsharers live within an approximately 30-mile radius whilst the other half live further afield (e.g Shropshire, London, Manchester, Leicester).

In the first year, publicity was generated through attending shows and over the radio. They have had a lot of coverage locally, but have not gained many new cropsharers locally as a result.

The scheme takes about 5 hours per week to run, except during the weeks where there are visits, when the work becomes full time. The more cropsharers, the more time needs to be spent preparing for and running weekends. The food for the weekend visits costs about £1000 per year (approximately £45 is spent on lunch every day during a visit-weekend).

A recent addition is the Sponsor a tree arrangement, at a time when English orchards are in decline. The intention has been to plant an interesting amenity orchard with diverse varieties of fruit trees. These include some traditional and some new varieties of apples, pears, Mirabelle plums, greengage and quince. They also asked an ecological landscape design company, Reckless Orchard, to create an interesting layout including a place to sit, contemplate and appreciate the environment.

The planting took place on February 2005. They are now looking for people who would like to support the future of the orchard by sponsoring the new trees as a gift to celebrate a memorable event, a birthday or an anniversary, or to commemorate a loved one.

Tree Sponsorship of £50 will cover:

- Planting, staking and rabbit-proofing a fruit tree
- An annotated orchard plan with your tree marked
- A opportunity to visit Dragon Orchard on an Annual Open Day over the next 5 years
- An information pack with details of the varieties to be planted

Activities

The Staniers envisaged the Cropshare CSA attracting mainly urban members, who would appreciate a taste of country life and belonging to a farm. In fact many local people have also become Cropsharers, wanting closer involvement with the land around them.

The 22 acre orchard grows several varieties of eating and cooking apples as well as cider fruit, using integrated pest management, minimum sprays and allowing the fruit to ripen on the trees before being hand picked and hand graded.

Organic conversion is being considered, although it seems unlikely at present because it would mean having to spray the crop preventatively about 20 times a year, whereas currently it is only sprayed about 5 or 6 times annually. No final decision on this has been made. It is possible that the subject will be discussed with the cropsharers.

In Spring 2004, the Staniers plan to replant an orchard with unusual and late varieties. In order to choose which varieties to plant, the cropsharers were consulted informally at an event and through a leaflet. Whilst not binding, this input will be used to assist the Staniers in making their decision.

Cropsharers receive a quarterly newsletter with information about fruit growing and recipes. Cropsharers participation in the farm and local culture is an important part of the project. There are farm weekend events four times a year, attended by up to 80 people. These tie in with local events such as a harvest festival and dance, and a poetry trail through the orchard as part of the Ledbury poetry festival. There are seasonal celebrations such as wassailing, pruning and orchard walks, wild life talks and workshops with local crafts people. Food is provided from the farm, including rare breed pork for the BBQs.

Cropsharers have taken an interest in matters beyond the orchard itself, such as the reed bed sewage system and ecological farm building. They go and visit the cider maker, local ice cream maker, charcoal maker and apple juicer. They stay in local B&Bs and use local restaurants and in this way the Cropshare CSA supports several small local businesses.

Future

Friendships are being made and personal contact with the farmers is important, so the Staniers do not intend for the Cropshare CSA to grow much beyond 100 Cropshares. They need to keep the enterprise fairly simple and contained so that it fits with other activities on the farm.

As mentioned earlier, the Staniers would like to involve more local people and host visits from school children and other groups more often. This would necessitate increasing loos and hand-washing facilities. They are currently investigating whether they are eligible for funding for this from DEFRA's Rural Enterprise Scheme. They are also consulting Farming and Countryside in Education (FACE) and Access to Farms about expanding their school visits.

They are also investigating the possibility of supplying fruit to local schools.

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