

Cultivating Communities farming at your fingertips



Cultivating Communities



Soil Association

Cultivating Communities

The aim of the Soil Association Cultivating Communities project, funded by the Lottery Community Fund, was to develop community support for low-income farmers who are severely disadvantaged as a result of foot and mouth disease, BSE, swine fever, flooding and agricultural recession.

Inspired by the concept of community supported agriculture (CSA) the project (April 2002–March 2005) explored and developed a host of initiatives that allow communities to share the responsibility and commitment to building a more local and equitable agricultural system. The project has worked with a wide range of initiatives:

- That link farmers and consumers in a relationship of mutual support
- Which allow farmers to focus on land stewardship and still maintain productive and profitable farms
- That provide an opportunity to bring sustainable food production back to the heart of our culture.

This report draws together the Cultivating Communities experience to provide an ongoing resource and inspiration.

Acknowledgements

Cultivating Communities is grateful to all the members of the steering group: Bill Acworth (Little Hidden Farm), Anita Aggarwal (Soil Association), Christina Ballinger (Somerset Food Links), Helen Barber (Co-operativesUK), Martin Biss (West Dorset Food & Land Trust/Dorset Community Action), Robbie Brighton (Land Heritage), David Button (Plunkett Foundation), Tim Crabtree (West Dorset Food & Land Trust), Caroline Davies (The Rural Stress Information Network), Suzanne Davies, Rob Gittins (Co Active Ltd), Andrew Goldring (Permaculture Association), Christine Goodall (Countryside Agency), Jeremy Isles (Federation of City Farms & Community Gardens), Bernard Jarman (Biodynamic Agricultural Association), Tim Machen (Land Heritage), Rob Macklin (The National Trust), Chris Marshall (Tablehurst & Plaw Hatch CSA), Mick Marston (Soil Association), Nick McAllister (Community Composting Network), Tony McMahon (Royal Agricultural Benevolent Institution), Simon Michaels (F3), Robert Paterson (University of Salford), Clive Peckham (Alimenterra), James Petts (Countryside Agency), Greg Pilley (Soil Association), Sarah Pitt (Natural History Unit), Richard Pitts (Cyfanfyd), Professor Jules Pretty (Centre For Environment & Society), Allan Rees (National Society of Allotment & Leisure Gardeners), Sue Seymour (Radford Mill Farm), Neil Sherwood (Countryside Agency), Geoff Stokes (National Society of Allotment & Leisure Gardeners), Sue Stoner (ACRE), Stuart Thompson (NFU) and Judith Towers (Elm Farm Research Centre)

Community supported agriculture

What is community supported agriculture?

Community supported agriculture (CSA) is a term coined in the USA and increasingly used in the UK. Fundamental to the concept is a relationship of mutual support between farmers and growers and the communities that eat the food they produce. It allows consumers the opportunity to reconnect to the land, food production, farmers and growers.

For consumers, CSA is an opportunity to directly support local food production and have a say in shaping landscapes. For food producers it can provide a secure market for their produce.



How do CSAs organise themselves?

CSAs reflect the culture of the communities they serve, the capabilities of the CSA land and the farmers who manage it. Therefore no two CSAs are likely to be the same and tend to be dynamic as the community's needs change over time. In the UK we have come across a variety of initiatives – all with direct public participation – such as:

- Whole farm CSAs
- Customer-supported box schemes
- Conservation based initiatives
- Intentional communities
- Rent/adopt schemes
- Urban food growing projects
- Community allotments
- Charitable projects.

The case studies in this document illustrate this range of diversity.

An example might be a vegetable grower may draw up a budget reflecting the production costs for the year, and community members sign up and purchase their shares either in a lump sum or instalments. In return for their investment members may receive a box of fresh, locally grown food every week.

Another example might be where a local community invests or lends money to a local farm to capitalise a change in their business (for example start a small dairy herd) and receive interest in dairy produce.



What are the benefits of CSA?

CSA gives farmers and growers the fairest return on their products. They develop a more secure market for their produce, and can invest their time on growing the food rather than looking for customers. As with all types of local food initiatives – box schemes, farmers' markets, food co-ops etc - the local economy is stimulated by consumers supporting local business. The grower is part of a community and no longer isolated.

Consumers benefit enormously by receiving fresh, locally grown produce on a regular basis. Education about where food comes from and how it is produced is also a strong feature of these schemes. Most CSA schemes welcome members to come along to open days and even help with the harvest. As CSA farms are directly accountable to their consumer members, they strive to provide fresh, high-quality food, typically using organic or biodynamic farming methods.

“I’d never even met the farmers who produced most of what I ate, and I had no idea what they had done to the food. Now I know who is growing my vegetables, and sometimes I go and help him in the garden.”

Jade Bashford, Stroud Community Agriculture, Gloucestershire

“When I go to the supermarket I will do a week’s shopping as fast as I can, but I can quite happily spend a couple of hours walking through the farm with my children to buy some sausages from the farm shop.”

Chris Marshall, Tablehurst and Plaw Hatch CSA co-operative

Where does the idea come from?

This model of local agriculture reaches back 35 years to Japan where a women’s neighbourhood group concerned about the methods used to produce their food, initiated a direct growing and purchasing relationship between themselves and local farms. This arrangement, called ‘teikei’ in Japanese, translates philosophically to ‘putting the farmers’ face on food’. CSA also evolved in Europe (Germany, Austria and Switzerland) in the 1960s, as food co-operatives, stimulated by the rapid industrialisation of food production and where consumers felt increasingly detached from the sources of their food.

What is the current interest in CSA?

The CSA concept was introduced to North America from Switzerland in 1985 and by 2002 there were an estimated 1,400 CSAs across the US and Canada, involving over 100,000 families.

In the UK our farming systems are increasingly being questioned, there is a growing amount of interest in community involvement in farming and the Soil Association has identified over 100 initiatives where consumers and producers have entered into CSA-type partnerships.

The Cultivating Communities project

Project achievements

CSA as a concept is now widely recognised within the local food sector, and local food issues are increasingly a concern of the public who are looking for opportunities to change the way that food is produced and brought to their tables. During the Cultivating Communities project we have seen:

- Xx new CSA developed
- XX CSAs supported
- Xx people benefited
- £xx benefit to local economies through CSA
- xx potential CSAs considering further development and seeking support.

Lessons

Recent news reports and media coverage show that consumers are increasingly concerned about how food is produced, where it comes from and its nutritional benefits. Rapid increases in direct sales of organic produce from farms, farmers markets and through box schemes and CSAs reflect these concerns and show real opportunities for growers whose businesses remain on the margins of economic viability. The challenge of how to join these, perhaps distant links in the chain remains, but new and innovative models are being tested all the time.

The term community supported agriculture (CSA) can conjure up misconceptions that hinder its promotion, especially amongst farmers. CSA implies a one way relationship and is somewhat ‘technical’. Farmers generally do not seek community support, rather communities seek farmer support. Awareness of the concept and the commitment required is still far from reaching the thresholds needed to see unsupported proliferation of CSAs.

However, its has been fulfilling to see communities take up the banner of Community Supported Agriculture and make it their own. We have seen community projects use the idea to achieve not only closer links to food production and their local shops and markets, but also as a vehicle for community development and health improvement.

The circumstances that see communities and farms coming together are still few and far between, requiring a particular set of skills and time. However established CSAs illustrate how producer-consumer co-operative enterprises deliver clear advantages that in most cases has ensured the long term sustainability of otherwise marginal businesses.

Building on press and media coverage of food and diet concerns by promoting sustainable food production and distribution systems, like CSAs, would be one way of further encouraging new projects. However, the 'newness' of the concept means that many developing or emerging CSAs will still need support from outside their project. We hope, that as more projects become established a network of CSAs across the UK will evolve and support can come from within the movement itself, as now happens with farmers' markets.

'Food culture' is a term that we increasingly use and hear being used. Although the term is fairly ambiguous, it is a term that people recognise and aspire to develop for themselves and their communities. Promoting and developing a sustainable UK food culture, where people develop a sense of identity and place based around the food they eat and the landscape that farming creates, would in turn develop the awareness and commitment required to promote farmer-consumer associations.



The barriers to farm/consumer links

Typically the barriers to developing links between farms and their consumers include:

- **Lack of food production and processing skills**
Horticulture, butchery and so on
- **Large group management skills**
Facilitating member/potential member meetings
- **Awareness**
Misperceptions of time and finance commitments and broad range of opportunities for involvement
- **Time**
Lack of development time from farmers who are already busy farming and selling their produce where they can, even though they know CSA will give them greater returns and are already 'sold' on the idea



What must be done

- Promote the concept, and derivations of CSA
- Enable networking and mutual support between existing initiatives
- Facilitate the development of a food culture that links consumers and producers
- Provide access to funding for community based food initiatives
- Good sign-posting to other sources of support (for example in group skills)



Dragon Orchard Cropsharers

A farmer led CSA with 22 acre orchard in Herefordshire, where members pay for a share in the yearly harvest of apples, pears and products made from them. The enterprise is farmer-led and provides opportunities for members to enjoy and understand the local landscape and culture.

History

Dragon Orchard is a small traditional fruit farm that has been tended by the same family for over 70 years. Whilst growing practices have remained much the same, markets have changed hugely in recent years due to the dominance of supermarkets and imports.

The Staniers had heard of CSA from the Soil Association and Dragon Orchard Cropsharers was conceived as an exciting innovation to re-establish links between producers and consumers. Initially, around 12 months were spent discussing the legal and financial aspects of the project. A brochure was then designed and printed and a website created ready for launch at the Ludlow Food & Drink Festival in September 2001.

Organisation

This CSA operates as a farmer-controlled business. In the first season there were 30 Cropsharers and they aim to grow to 100 cropshares.

The scheme takes about five hours per week to run, except during the weeks where there are visits, when the work becomes full time. The Staniers are considering the inclusion of a workshare scheme whereby people could pay for a proportion of their share through work.



Finance

The majority of set-up costs were spent on the brochure (£2,500), with the remainder funding the website (£1,000) and the Staniers' time. These costs were met by the family. Cropsharers pay £300 per year. Their share in the harvest comprises of:

- Eating apples (2 x 30lb box of different varieties)
- Cooking apples (2 x 30lb box)
- Pears (10lb tray)
- Single variety apple juice (12 bottles)
- Cider (12 bottles)
- Apple chutney & plum jam

Approximately half the share price goes towards the orchard produce and the other on the four annual weekend visits.

Activities

In 2002, Dragon Orchard Cropsharers reached the final of the NFU Countryside Competition. They are described as 'super-heroes' in Rick Stein's book, *Local Heroes*.

The Open Weekends, which take place each season, include a meal both days, orchard walks and talks, visits to other local producers and demonstrations from local craft workers. There is often a special seasonal celebration such as wassailing in winter, blossom time in the spring and harvest in the autumn.

Cropsharers are kept informed through a quarterly newsletter.



Earthshare

Established in 1994, EarthShare is a CSA based in Moray, northeast Scotland. They grow soft fruit and vegetables for up to 200 local families. Subscribers sign up to the scheme for a year at a time and they are encouraged to come to the field to help. Earthshare aim to put people back in touch with the seasons, the land, and how their food is produced.

History

It is set up as a workers co-operative and employs one full time and five part time members of staff.

Organisation

Subscribers are encouraged to become involved in the growing of their food and are asked to help with labour-intensive tasks such as weeding and soft fruit picking. Over three-quarters of subscribers choose to do workshifts...and they all seem to enjoy the experience! Those that either cannot or chose not to do the workshifts pay for someone else to do their work. Subscriber help with workshifts is central to EarthShare's success – without such help they believe they would not be able to farm organically.

Subscribers make a commitment to EarthShare for a year at a time; during that year they receive an equal share of everything that is harvested. They pick up their boxes, either a standard or a small box, from 3.00pm on Fridays or any time during weekends from pickup points in Forres, Findhorn or Elgin. Many subscribers have organised a shared collection rota and Earthshare will pass on the name of the nearest EarthShare neighbour to anyone wanting to benefit from this. Earthshare members are very involved and supported of the project. Two subscribers wrote a cookery book, *The Boxing Clever Cookbook*, to help other members use the seasonal vegetable they receive from Earthshare.

Finance

The cost of subscription depends on several factors:

- Standard or small box
- Whether the Workshare option is taken up
- Whether payment is made in one lump sum in advance or by monthly standing order
- Where the box is collected from
- 20 per cent payment in New Moray LETS is also accepted.

Activities

There are various social events throughout the year based around traditional celebrations, for example the Tattie Festival in October which celebrates the end of potato harvesting, or the summer garden party when subscribers get together and enjoy strawberries, cream and cucumber sandwiches.

Weekly box notes, which include recipe suggestions, are put in with the produce and are also added to the website, where information on produce can also be found. A quarterly newsletter is also produced.

Goddard Farm

A small biodynamic vegetable box scheme CSA in Kent, supplying 20 households who commit in advance to a share of the season's crops. There are open days, a newsletter and two of the scheme members volunteer on the farm.

History

The family moved to Goddard Farm 4 years ago with little previous experience of growing, aiming to be self sufficient.

Organisation

The vegetable enterprise runs as a business and is unincorporated. Decisions and finance are controlled by the farmer, who owns the land. The simple, unincorporated system was felt to be best suited to this small set up.

One benefit of this structure is that it is simple to run; no meetings are required. However, it does mean that the farmer has to initiate everything. The farmer would consider switching to a co-operative-type structure if the opportunity arose because it would mean he would not have to carry out all the management tasks and that responsibility would be shared. The farmer would like to expand from 20 boxes to 40 or 50 to increase efficiency.

Finance

The business raised enough in the first year to provide the farmer with a small income. Some capital investment was also made. All the income came from supplying 20 households with vegetables and the farmer worked full time. The enterprise has had no grant funding, except organic conversion payments.

Activities

Customers commit to supporting the scheme for a season at a time, and provide six post dated cheques. They receive a share of the crops each week for nine months of the year. Over 100 different crops are planted, using one acre and two polytunnels. All the vegetables go into the boxes, including gluts, and a little is bought in if a key crop fails. Customers are encouraged to help on the farm, though only two volunteer regularly, in exchange for their vegetables. Vegetable boxes are delivered and all the customers live in two nearby villages. Customers are found by word of mouth, and by advertising in a local paper.

Members receive a monthly newsletter. There is an annual open day attended by about 40 people including many who are not customers. There is a farm walk and family activities such as a bug hunt and potato shy.

The Green Patch

The Green Patch, Kettering, Northamptonshire, is a grant aided urban community growing initiative with a box scheme and trading links with local organic farms. Its main objective is to provide local, mainly low-income families with healthy affordable organic produce.

History

David Sanders and his partner were keen to continue their agricultural and community development work when they returned from overseas in 2000. They set up a box scheme for 25 people and bought in local organic produce whilst they sought land. In 2002, Kettering Borough Council agreed to their proposal to use 21 disused allotments with SRB (Single Regeneration Budget) funding, and work began in March.

The CSA began with the 25 box scheme customers as members, and research was carried out to evaluate the needs of other local people. They followed the steps in the Soil Association's CSA Action Manual to get started.

Organisation

The CSA is registered as a not-for-profit company limited by guarantee, in the form of a community co-operative. Northampton Co-op Development Agency helped develop the structure. A volunteer management committee is responsible for the organisation and is elected at the AGM.

Finances

The CSA has received substantial grant funding during its first three years. Grant funding has so far covered the costs of four polytunnels, training for volunteers and the core group, secure storage and a resource centre.

The box scheme brought an income of £5,000 during six months of operation in 2001. There are currently 55 box scheme subscribers and they hope to increase to 80 boxes per week. They plan to invest in better equipment and machinery as well as recruit more volunteers in the field.

The CSA hopes to increase income by providing training placements.

Activities

At present, their own produce is supplemented with produce from a certified organic supplier in Lincolnshire but they aim to grow everything for the boxes, for 11 months of the year.

Members participate in wildlife work on the land, such as pond making and hedge laying. They can also use the site for music, drama, etc.

The CSA works with other community groups, in particular the neighbouring Allotment Association and the local community centre.

The CSA collaborates with local schools who designed a logo and the name, 'The Green Patch', and they are encouraged to visit and learn about food.

The CSA has been operating a children's garden club as well as weekly informal work projects in the fields with a supervised Lifelong Learning team called 'Works for All' and another supervised team from a local hospital for mentally ill patients.

Growing Communities

A social enterprise in Hackney, London, providing community growing, links with farms, therapeutic placements, volunteering, training, a box scheme, shop and farmers market.

History

Growing Communities began 10 years ago in an attempt to make Hackney a better place to live. A group of supporters began paying a subscription and in 1994 the first vegetables were delivered from a farm they supported in Aylesbury. The scheme soon grew to 50 households and has developed towards its wider vision since then.

Organisation

Growing Communities is a not-for-profit company limited by guarantee which reflects the philanthropic nature of the organisation and provides liability protection for management committee/directors. There are currently 10 part time members of staff. The scheme has a volunteer management committee of six which is elected by volunteers and box scheme members at the AGM.

Urban growing schemes operate on three sites of less than one acre in total. The sites were derelict. The land is organic and the produce is sold through the box scheme, a small shop and the Farmers Market. A grower is employed volunteers help out in the gardens. Two sites are in parks and the third is in the grounds of a community centre.

Finance

Growing Communities has an annual turnover of around £100,000, just over half of which comes from their own income generating activities (mainly the Box Scheme) while the rest is provided by external funders including the Community Fund and the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation. There are no shareholders. Profits are invested in the enterprise. The scheme has few capital assets and does not own land.

The box scheme services some 140 households who receive weekly boxes priced between £3.50 and £8.50. Part payments in LETS is accepted (Local Exchange Trading Scheme).

Current development work including the farmers market and Volunteer Task Force is grant funded by the New Opportunities Fund, the SEED Programme, The Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, the Bridge House Estates Trust and Woodberry Down and Stamford Hill SRB. The enterprise intends to become financially self-supporting through fees from the farmers market, increasing the sales of their own produce, fees from providing placements in the Volunteer Task Force and by continuing to explore other potential income generating areas of work such as running training courses.

Activities

The enterprise has several activities linked to sustainable local food. Several farms near London supply as much as possible in season and members go and visit these farms for work days. Growing Communities aims to support rural businesses and break down urban/rural divisions.

The gardens are used for training and demonstration purposes, for schools and for groups with special needs, with the help of an outreach worker. Community events are held in the gardens. A weekly farmers market with 8-10 producers was launched in May 2003.

Sedlescombe Vineyard

A Sussex vineyard with a Rentavine scheme. Rentavine members are entitled to discounts on organic wines, juices, liqueurs, fruit wines and ciders, and have priority access to wines produced in small quantities. They may visit the vineyard for leisure, wine tasting or to help with the work.

History

Established in 1979, Sedlescombe is England's oldest organic vineyard, selling for wholesale and through a farm shop. After inheriting ten acres of land in 1974, Roy Cook realised the conditions were ideal for growing vines. The vineyard is now 17 acres and includes the organic vineyard at Bodiam Castle. Applying the CSA ideals, the rent-a-vine scheme was initiated in 2001. The Cooks now produce around 15,000 bottles of organic wine a year.

Organisation

The scheme is run as a private business. Members may come and work on the vineyard and take their payment for work done in the form of a discounted subscription fee. Sedlescombe is one of only four known English organic vineyards. It is open to visitors and part of the Soil Association's demonstration farm network.

Finance

Up to 50 per cent of the annual production from the vines is offered to club members, and they can purchase wine at a 30 per cent discount, although there is no obligation to purchase any wine. Most of the existing members are individuals who do not live locally and their memberships were gifts. Businesses may also join and can have wine with personalised labels to use as corporate gifts or sales incentives.

Activities

Members have access to the open vineyard and woodland nature trail for walks, picnics and parties, and can attend wine tasting sessions. Members who want to be involved in the grape harvest or other vineyard work may come and join in. Overnight caravan accommodation is available for members offering to help for longer than one day.

A monthly e-newsletter is sent to members, covering farm work in progress, harvest forecasts and some of the grower's seasonal challenges. Eventually the vineyard hopes to set up a webcam for a live visual display of the vines.

A bulletin board on the website allowing members to communicate with each other is currently in the pipeline.

Stroud Community Agriculture

A community-led enterprise, Gloucestershire's Stroud Community Agriculture was set up in order to create a community around a farm and to understand and celebrate the life of the land. Members pay an annual subscription and further payments for vegetables or meat. Their farm land is certified organic and aspires to biodynamic status.

History

In 2000, a group of supporters produced a strategy to work with a local organic farm and developing the CSA project. The following spring, some supporters began to pay a monthly subscription and a grower was employed on two acres of rented land. They now rent 23 acres closer to Stroud.

Organisation

The farm business is owned and controlled by the members. Stroud Community Agriculture is incorporated as an Industrial and Provident Society Community Co-op. They employ the equivalent of a full time farmer between a vegetable grower and stock-keeper. A core group of eight volunteers are elected by the members to do much of the development work.



Stroud LETS allotment

Finance

Annual membership costs £24 (£12 concessions), and vegetable shares are £30 for the first share and £20 per additional monthly share. Surplus vegetables are sold for wholesale, and produce is supplemented by buying in from local growers where possible, and otherwise UK sourced through a local organic wholesaler. The farmers are paid £15,500 pro rata, the land and machinery is rented, and the farm business has little capital of its own. A co-operative pig keeping scheme – ‘Hog Hands’ costs an additional £150 for an estimated return of 25kg of pork – equivalent to half a pig. Hog Hands commit to participating in a pig-feeding rota, or pay an additional £3.75 per day. There is a growing suckler herd, and Stroud Community Agriculture wants to expand to provide a more diverse produce range. In 2003 the SEED lottery fund awarded £22,500 for membership development work in order to make the initiative more accessible to disadvantaged groups in the area.

Activities

There are quarterly planning meetings, monthly workdays, and quarterly newsletters. Members can join in a nutrition study group, and celebrations such as Candlemass, bonfire night, barbecues, harvest supper, snail races and picnics. Stroud Community Agriculture is a Cultivating Communities Open Farm and shares learning about the model.



A shared triple allotment in Gloucestershire providing vegetables for the growers' families, during summer months, additional boxes of veg are sold for LETS (local exchange trading system).

History

Stroud had one of the first LETS as an alternative to cash in the UK. In 1980 a group of LETS members took on an allotment, and in 1989 they took on a second, adjoining allotment. By 1991 there was a significant surplus of vegetables during the summer months, and the group set up a small box scheme to provide three families with a box of vegetables every week between June and September.

Organisation

LETS membership is open to everyone as long as they are able to offer some product or service to barter with other members, for example providing eggs, car maintenance, or pet-sitting. Anyone is welcome to come and work on the allotment, and those who are LETS members are paid in \$LETS. The LETS coordinator manages membership and accounts, and is paid a salary from the annual membership fee. Annual meetings are held to plan the crops, which are grown without the use of pesticides or artificial.

Finance

Regular customers pay for their boxes with LETS and cash after agreeing to buy a box every week between June and September. Boxes cost £/\$10 per week if collected and £/\$12 per week if delivered. The cash is used to buy seed, manure, allotment rent, tools, etc, and there is no surplus. The number of boxes provided over a season is monitored, and at the end of the season, customers pay any cash balance into the LETS allotment bank account. The LETS balance is recorded in the LETS system and offsets the labour cost of the allotment workers who are paid \$5 LETS per hour.

Activities

Four regular allotment workers meet every Friday morning for three hours to work the three adjoining allotments, and there are other workers who join them occasionally. Several times a year they meet socially, when they also discuss crop rotation planning.

Tablehurst and Plaw Hatch CSA

An East Sussex community co-operative that owns two successful farm businesses bordering the village. Tablehurst and Plaw Hatch are neighbouring farms I don't think so! But neighbour the same village - best check? comprising around 700 acres, most of which has bio-dynamic status Much of the land they farm is owned by a Land trust protecting its use for Biodynamic farming in perpetuity.

History

Tablehurst Farm was previously managed by Emerson College charitable trust, a Steiner teacher-training college which used the farm for teaching biodynamic agriculture, but as profits from agriculture declined, the college found it increasingly difficult to farm economically. Plaw Hatch Farm was bequeathed to St. Anthony's charitable trust around 1980, 'for the community'. By the mid 1990s, both farms were in financial trouble, but a local group saw a possibility of saving Tablehurst converting it into a community-owned farm. They incorporated in 1995 as a community co-operative and Over a short period raised £150,000, enough to acquire the farm assets. In 2001, £65,000 was raised through the issue of co-op shares to acquire the Plaw Hatch business.

Organisation

There are around 400 individual shareholders in the co-op, many of whom have more than one share. Shares cost £100 each, are not tradable and do not yield dividends or benefits. The value of share ownership is the sense of participation in a worthy community enterprise, and this has been sufficient to generate sustained interest in, and commitment to, the community farm initiative. Each farm has a management team which is run by the farmers and includes co-op representation. Shares entitle members to vote and thereby influence the co-operative's activities.



Finance

The finances raised by the co-op members secured the future of the farm businesses, purchased the assets from the college and made improvements to the infrastructure, such as the milking parlour and chicken houses. The farm received an environmental grant to reinstate a large pond, and an irrigation lake was paid for half by farm finances and half by a local resident. The recent renovation of the farm shop cost £15,000, and new processing equipment cost a further £7,000. Some co-op members have also donated their professional services to the farm. Business revenue is currently being used to fund the renting of a further 200 acres of land. This expansion is necessary because Tablehurst was unable to meet local demand for its produce. The farms have an annual turnover in excess of £250,000.

Activities

The supporters get together for a harvest barn dance, annual open day and regular farm walks. The farmers encourage the co-operative members to get involved in organising these events, which are also open to the wider community.

All livestock is slaughtered locally, processed by the resident butcher and sold through the farm shop. Wheat is milled for flour and oats grown for livestock feed. Potatoes and leeks are grown on a field scale and sold wholesale to shops, local vegetable box schemes and also through the farm shop. A beekeeper tends a number of hives and the honey is sold through the farm shop with profits going to Tablehurst Farm. A couple who recently joined the community planted an apple orchard. They work two and a half days a week on the farm in exchange for board and lodging and land rental. When the trees fruit in about five years, the couple will pay 10 per cent of the gross income to the farm. Up to six apprentices work with Tablehurst in return for board and lodgings, a weekly allowance of £25, and weekly lectures on biodynamic farming by guest speakers. The farm receives a local authority allowance for three adults with learning difficulties who live and work alongside the farm staff. At Tablehurst, most of the produce (mainly meat and poultry) is sold directly to the local community. Plaw Hatch's shop is thriving, selling vegetables, milk, yoghurt, cream and cheese. They also operate a local milk round.

Wester Lawrenceton

A Scottish cow-share loan scheme, where members lend against the value of organic dairy cows, with interest paid in cheese.

History

The cow share scheme began soon after Rodways came to Wester Lawrenceton Farm in 1997. They were chatting about how to raise capital for buying a herd with a neighbour who said “I wouldn’t mind owning a leg of a cow” and the idea emerged from there.

Organisation

The whole farm is a Company Limited by Guarantee, owned and controlled by (and employing) the farmers. Members come to the farm to collect their annual 4kg of cheese.

Finance

21 people have lent money to the farm, in units of £500. Lenders do not own individual animals but collectively their loans are equal to the value of the herd. They are paid interest in cheese, valued at £10/kg, which works out at eight per cent a year. They can have their loan repaid with six months’ notice but in practice most people regard the investment as part of a long term relationship with the farm. More people would like to lend money to the scheme but places are limited and people are chosen who will participate in the life of the farm. They are a wide range of mostly local people who knew the farm or had heard of the initiative through word of mouth.

Activities

The social, cultural and educational aspect of the CSA is important to the farmers. There are newsletters and events on the farm about three times per year. Most years there is a meeting of cow sharers too. Festivals are usually celebrated annually, attended by about 50 people. They draw on ancient Celtic, pagan and Christian traditions at St Bride’s day, Christmas Eve and Harvest time. The events also benefit the farmers, providing support and validation of their work and breaking the isolation of farming. There are also work days where groups of people tackle jobs such as clearing ragwort, path building and fence repairs.

Whiteholme Organic Network

A CSA meat marketing scheme with 243 acre farm, producing traditional breeds of beef, sheep and pigs to Soil Association organic standards. The farm has recently moved its marketing beyond selling produce direct to consumers to develop a farm scale community food project model, involving its customers in putting meat on their own tables.

History

To launch the community food project the farm wrote to its existing customers and ran four local meetings, which were advertised in the local press and on posters. Radio 4 took up the story and the farm has been featured on programmes.

The absence of a local organic butcher and the availability of grants led to the setting up of an on farm butchery and processing unit, in a converted barn using equipment bought from a butcher’s shop that was closing down.

Organisation

The farm has recruited 30-40 members to the project. Each member makes a financial commitment to support the farm for a year. They set up monthly standing orders to the farm of a minimum of £10 and then place orders for meat against this. One of the scheme’s members is an accountant. She is the treasurer and keeps a tally of members’ monthly payments and meat orders. Twice a year she sends out statements notifying members of their balance, so that they know how much meat they can still buy. The members are assured of a regular supply of the highest quality organic meat from a farm that they know. The farm is assured of a regular monthly income and can plan its future accordingly.

A semi-retired butcher works 2 days a week at the farm butchery cutting the meat and training John Perkin, the farmer. People are able to order any cut they like and a variety of sausages and burgers are made on site. All meat from the farm is sold directly to customers either through the community food project or through local farmers’ markets.

John delivers meat orders to agreed drop off points from where members come to collect. He uses the same refrigerated van for the weekly run to a small family run abattoir in Lockerbie. He collects the carcasses from the previous week’s run and after butchering, bones are incinerated on the farm and the ash is added to the compost to complete the organic cycle.

Finance

In the year 2003-2004 the farm has seen its turnover increase from £40,000 to £80,000. They hope in time to build to a turnover of £100,000.

Activities

The farm is part of the Soil Association’s network of demonstration organic farms and a Cultivating Communities ‘open farm’. People are welcomed and encouraged to walk the farm trail and can buy direct from the farm.

The Perkins communicate with their members and customers regularly via newsletters and their website. They attend several farmers markets and spend time considering the packaging and presentation of their produce.



Finding a CSA to join

Your first job is to find out if there is one near you that you can join. (see our website www.soilassociation.org/csa). We may not know of all CSAs or similar projects, so also look in local food directories or the Yellow Pages. The Soil Association also has a growing number of local organic groups, some of which are linked to farms and CSAs. (find your nearest group at www.soilassociation.org/?????). Listing of local community groups or health organisations might also contain information about CSAs near you.



Getting involved

If there is a local CSA you can join then there are many ways to get involved. CSA is about fostering links between producers and local consumers. Communication by whatever means is vital, and newsletters are a common feature. Most CSAs invite members to visit the farm and welcome volunteer assistance. Working shares are an option in some cases, whereby a member commits some time to work on the farm in exchange for a discount on membership costs, but this is not usually an obligation. For some farms apprenticeships are an integral component of the initiative. Apprenticeships provide valuable hands-on training and reliable labour for the farm.

There are plenty of opportunities around which to organise events on a CSA farm. Celebrating the seasons, lambing days, apple days, traditional and religious festivals are all good reasons to arrange a BBQ and barn dance! If you are keen to be involved with some hands on conservation work - creating new wildlife habitats (tree planting, pond digging etc), or maintaining existing habitat (coppicing woodland, learning to lay hedges etc), then a CSA farm might be the answer.



Setting up a new CSA

If you are interested in developing a CSA initiative in your area the Soil Association has a number of resources to assist you:

- **www.soilassociation.org/csa**

This section of the Soil Association website includes the Action Manual which is free to download – although can also be purchased in hard copy – as well as case studies, briefing sheets and links to other organisations and funding sources. You will also find the Cultivating Communities newsletter and newsletters from CSAs in the UK and overseas.

- **CSA email group**

To encourage CSAs to support each other the Cultivating Communities project has set up an open access email list for interested individuals to keep abreast of CSA developments in the UK. To join the list and receive emails from other members send a message to cultivatingcommunities-subscribe@yahoogroups.com

Further information

The following are published by, and are available from, the Soil Association:

- *A Share in the Harvest – CSA action manual* (£15)
- *A Share in the Harvest – A feasibility study for CSA* (£15)
- *Cultivating Co-operatives – Organisational structures for local food enterprises* (£15)
- *Local Food for Local People – A practical guide to developing sustainable local food economies* (£10)

Other useful publications:

- Henderson E & Van En R, *Sharing the Harvest – A guide to community supported agriculture*, Chelsea Green, 1999
- McFadden S & Groh TM, *Farms of Tomorrow Revisited – Community supported farms, farm supported communities*, The Biodynamic farming and Gardening Association, !@£\$



Soil Association

Bristol House
40–56 Victoria Street
Bristol BS1 6BY

T 0117 314 5000

F 0117 314 5001

E info@soilassociation.org

www.soilassociation.org

Soil Association Scotland

Tower Mains
18 Liberton Brae
Edinburgh EH16 6EA

T 0131 666 2474

F 0131 666 1684

E contact@sascotland.org

www.soilassociationscotland.org

Registered charity 206862

©Soil Association 2005