

Distribution Case Studies:

Community Supported Agriculture

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) is a farm structure in which the financial risk and, in some cases, work of production is shared by a community of members. It originated in Japan and Europe in the 1960's and since 1985 there has been a thriving CSA movement in the United States. Although CSAs have existed in the UK since the 1990s, a dramatic increase occurred in the last decade and there are now 106 CSA members of the CSA Network in the UK. In its purest form, members pay the full amount for a share of the harvest before the season has started (say £500), to provide the farmer with finance to buy seeds, equipment and an income until crops start, and then receive a share of each week's harvest. In practice, the model of CSA varies in terms of financial arrangements, labour requirements and according to whether it was initiated by the grower or the community. The three case studies below provide a taste of different models that currently exist in the UK.

Stroud Community Agriculture, Gloucestershire

Stroud Community Agriculture (SCA) is a community-initiated CSA and began in 2001 when a group of local people took on the rental of a 23-acre biodynamic farm near Stroud. The business is an Industrial and Provident Society Community Co-operative, owned and controlled by its subscribers, who elect a core group of eight members to make management decisions and employ the grower and farmer.

It now has 270 members, rents a total of 19ha of which 3ha is planted with biodynamic vegetables, and also raises pigs, cattle and sheep, enabling members to buy meat when they collect their veg share each week. A basic share is worth £44 per month, which includes a £3 membership fee to cover the administration of the CSA. Shares are paid for via a direct debit system, and the knowledge that there will be a regular monthly income makes it much easier to plan for labour and expenditure. Vegetables are collected from the farm each week, and sometimes members might be asked to pick part of their share, which they are directed to by a noticeboard in the veg patch indicating what quantity of vegetables to take.

Members are not required to work in this CSA, but can take part in regular community workdays if they choose. A limited number of members can pay for their annual share by working on the farm for a certain number of hours each week, subject to a written agreement. The farm has a turnover of around £170,000 and now employs three full time equivalent workers and a couple of seasonal workers. During the last two years, a new starter farm initiative has enabled two new entrant growers to rent one acre adjoining SCA to grow vegetables, which are sold via the CSA and other outlets. The guaranteed market and mentoring service offered by the grower at SCA give the new growers the confidence to develop their skills, before moving on to their own project after 1 to 2 years to make space for the next starter farmers.

Social events form an important element in building the community of SCA. Every month a social event of some sort brings members together, and many friendships have been formed during bar-b-cues, harvest suppers, bonfire night and even snail races! Many members have children, and value the connection with food production and the countryside that regular visits to the farm provide.

www.stroudcommunityagriculture.org

Chagfood Community Market Garden, Devon

Chagfood was initiated in 2009 by two local people, keen to bring vegetable growing back to the area. Twenty five initial members were recruited, two part-time growers were hired, an acre of land rented and a £38,600 Local Food Fund lottery grant secured to pay for infrastructure (three poly tunnels, a packing shed and a tool shed). An additional £9,800 grant from Dartmoor National Park subsidised the scheme



in the first two years, but from 2012 members subscriptions were able to fully fund running costs and the wages of two part time growers.

Chagfood has now expanded onto a second five acre site, and supplies year-round weekly veg-shares to 100 local households. Membership costs £450 per year for a small share, £600 for a medium share and £750 for a large share. Members are encouraged to pay up front for the whole year, although they also have the option of a monthly standing order. Although day to day management decisions are made by the growers, Chagfood is a Community Interest Company, and at the AGM each autumn members are asked to vote on the box price and the growers wages. Members are also invited every Thursday throughout the growing season to assist with growing tasks and harvesting and are kept up to date with a weekly newsletter. On average five members tend to come and help on a regular basis. Veg shares are dropped off at five collection points (usually a members house) in local communities around Chagford.

www.chagfood.org.uk

The Oak Tree Low Carbon Farm

The Oak Tree Low Carbon Farm was set up in 2011 on 12 acres (4.9Ha) of previously intensively cultivated arable land, bought by Joanne Mudhar. She and two other Directors set up a Community Interest Company in 2012, and started growing vegetables on three-quarters of an acre of land. Horse manure from a neighbouring farm was initially used at the farm and cattle, pigs and hens were soon introduced to increase the organic matter and fertility of a sandy soil that had been degraded through over-farming. The farm is not certified organic due to the costs of certification, but runs according to organic principles.

This CSA model allows members to choose from three tiers of membership. Full membership costs £9 per week and members are requested to commit to doing one to two hours of farm work per week depending on the season. Reduced Hours membership involves half to one hour per week of farm work, and costs £13. And, for £16 per week Armchair members can enjoy all the benefits of membership without any of the work commitment. Armchair members in the Ipswich area can also have vegetables delivered to their door. In return, members are rewarded with a share of the weekly vegetable harvest. Additional soft fruit, cut-flower, egg and animal product shares are also available for an extra cost. All members must pay a one-off deposit of £25, refunded at the end of the first year if all work commitments have been met. A veg share is provided every week of the year, but in the spirit of CSA, members accept that the volume of vegetables in a box will vary according to the time of year. Some summer gluts have been processed into preserves and chutneys for use during the leaner months.



While the vegetables and other produce are enjoyed by the members, for most people it is the involvement in the work of the farm (be it vegetable or cut-flower growing, harvesting or animal care), being in a beautiful natural environment and the sense of working together as a community that motivates them to stay as members. The farm has also seen the amount of wildlife increase at the site which for several years has hosted breeding Barn Owls. A previously monocultural arable field has thus been transformed over seven years into a diverse small farm, feeding 40 households (increasing to 60 households - around 240 people - in 2018), whilst building soil fertility, wildlife and community. The farm has faced many challenges during its establishment phase, due to lack of institutional support for small and organic farms. However, a sign of the CSA's success is that when its founder, Joanne Mudhar moved on in 2017, one of the farm members was willing to buy the land and Joanne's work has been continued by the farm's four directors and three part-time (1.8 full time equivalent) staff.

www.the-oak-tree.co.uk