

Charter for CSAs in the USA and Canada

Introduction:

In February 1979, a tractorcade of 6,000 farmers tied up traffic in Washington, D.C. to protest farm policy that ended parity, the pricing system that had linked farm prices to the costs of other sectors of the economy. The deepening farm crisis of the 1980s accelerated the loss of family-scale farms. Developers were grabbing up farmland at the rate of many acres a day. In face of the grim reality that small and mid-sized, family-scale community based farming could disappear completely in the US, people who wanted to farm and support farms had to invent creative alternatives – that is how Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) was born.

In Anthony Graham's words: *"Ideas have a way of hovering until the time is right or the right person or group can give it form. Booker T Whatley sounds like he was a forerunner in the idea of communities supporting farms and farmers, but I don't think he can be said to have created the CSA concept. In the mid 80's what has now come to be known as CSA was an idea whose time had come, with roots in many places and in many people. It grew out of a sense of community and it came as an answer to a need. When the time was ripe it grew exponentially through the work of many people, not the least of whom were the farmers who recognized a great idea and ran with it."* In the South, Booker T. Whatley researched and taught farmers "How to Make \$100,000 from a 25 Acre Farm." Inspired by Swiss and German examples, Robyn Van En and Trauger Groh, Anthony Graham and Lincoln Geiger established the first CSA farms in the US in 1986, Indian Line Farm and Temple-Wilton Community Farm. Robyn became CSA's Johnny Appleseed, spreading the concept at Biodynamic and Organic conferences across the country. In 2017, there are over 7300 CSAs in the US.

At the 1993 New York State CSA Gathering in Syracuse, I shared my thoughts on the significance of CSA as an antidote to the dominant industrial food system: "We need to take our work more seriously. We have the chance to build the food system that will replace the current one. CSA is an idea – a tremendously flexible concept for a new consumer-farmer connection, an alternative system of distribution based on community values. The economics of direct sales make this a win-win solution for farmers and consumers. The farmer gets a decent price and the consumer pays less, since there is no middleman. For the farmer, the CSA offers the possibility of a broad support group of people who genuinely care about the farm's survival and who are willing to share the farmer's risks. Consumers have the opportunity to connect with the earth, know and trust the people who grow their food and support the local economy and to transform themselves into the much more meaningful and empowered stance of a person who is taking responsibility of one of the most basic needs of a human being. The big question we must answer – will this be sustainable?"

Anthony Graham writes: *"When we started the Temple Wilton Community Farm with a series of community meetings in the winter of 1985/1986, one thing we were sure of was that we were not selling anything - we were far more interested in community and in the 'culture' in agriculture. What we were attempting to set up was a way for a community of people to support the existence of a farm through good times and bad by making pledges of financial support over the course of one year. By agreeing to support the existence of the farm our members became co-farmers....At that time we were all talking and thinking a lot about how to bring form to the ideas that were swirling around, and in one of our conversations Trauger was the one who came up with the*

idea that the members could also be seen as farmers and we also decided that the farmers should make pledges as members (which we still do).”

Similar to what happened in Japan after 30 years of Teikei, CSA in the US is facing something of a crisis. Across the country, CSAs that had waiting lists are having trouble finding enough members. Interesting to note is that CSAs that stick to their guns are not having trouble. Temple-Wilton, which does not even have a price but asks members to contribute what they can afford and then take as much food as they need, still has a waiting list. Core member Ruth Katz writes: *“We at Clinton Hill CSA have been very fortunate thus far (knock wood!) that our membership has stayed up in the last few years. I’m aware that it can change at any time. I think one reason is that our neighborhood, for all of its gentrification, is still a bit of a food desert, with no really terrific supermarket. Honestly, the CSA is about convenience to some degree. We’ve kept up a long wait list, and that has been our most reliable tool to fill our membership each year; we’ve just almost doubled our winter share membership by offering the winter shares to the wait list. We also have started offering half shares, and that seems to be a strong and important tool to reach people who might not have room in their lives for a full share. And we have a wonderful farmer in Ted Blomgren; his expertise has grown so much in these last 15 years.”*

Emilie Miyauchi of Just Food writes: *“There’s been a lot of talk about how to make CSA more “consumer friendly” and flexible. While we understand this mindset, especially in trying to compete for NYC’s attention, we see this as a potentially endless pursuit. Someone else will always be there with an easier platform for food delivery, generally someone with a lot of up front capital. Our farmers and our communities can’t play by the same rules as companies like Farmigo, Good Eggs, or whatever comes next to replace them. The CSA model works and is equitable only when we recognize and try to meet the real needs of farmers and share-holders. We need to get better at listening to one another, expressing ourselves, and finding ways to engage and get creative when we feel our interests are in conflict. We need to dig down deeper into what community is and what it can mean with the understanding that for some time now and certainly going forward into a new administration, community is in jeopardy. Part of the hardest work of keeping the CSA model viable is building back community, protecting what exists, and galvanizing people around a shared sense of our entanglement with one another and the natural world. It is also time for CSA farms to address the tension between farm owners and farm workers to make CSA a model for healthy business and fair labor.”*

So, let’s respond together as a CSA community. Taking a clue from the rapid growth of CSAs in new areas of the world (France, UK, all of Europe, China), we are proposing the adoption of a CSA Charter that provides a definition of what CSA is all about. Together, regional networks and independent CSAs will launch the Charter on CSA Sign-up Day, February 24, 2017 as a way to attract public attention and, hopefully, inspire many new people to join CSAs. The CSAs that endorse the Charter will post it on their website along with a logo that identifies them as charter endorsers. In doing this, the CSAs commit to upholding the values of the Charter. All over the country, we will get local press to cover this collective action, the creation of a common platform.

List of resources to help strengthen CSAs that sign the Charter.

Elizabeth Henderson, *Sharing the Harvest: A Citizen's Guide to Community Supported Agriculture* (Chelsea Green, 2007) and also *Compartiendo la Cosecha*, available as an e-book from Libros en Accion, 2017.

Simon Huntley – Small Farm Central

Cultivating Customers: A Farmer's Guide to On-Line Marketing – wonderful contrast with Temple-Wilton and Steven McFadden. Just the facts, mam. Super practical.

From Steven McFadden:

Farms of Tomorrow Revisited: Community-Supported Farms

“Community circle develops dynamic vision for CSA farms & food”: <http://bit.ly/2hFKjv0>

Just Food website: <http://www.justfood.org/csa>

Learn more about CSA through our Resource Center, where you will find:

- [Tipsheets](#) that will guide you through the process of starting and managing a CSA project in NYC
- [Videos](#) that will provide tips to better manage your CSA
- The full inclusion and representation of community means making the effort to bring in low-income community. Ways we've had success in this include:
 - Sliding scale payment structure
 - Accepting SNAP and processing EBT payments
 - Fundraising to make revolving loan funds available
 - Sister CSAs - CSA is high(er)-income community shares funds with CSA in low(er)-income community
 - Half-share/ share-a-share

Fair Share CSA Coalition website - <http://www.csacoalition.org>

Urgenci the International Network for CSA - <http://urgenci.net/>

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It is up to each CSA farm and its community to build a model that suits them best and to mutually ensure that the CSA upholds the principles of this charter.

1. Farm members buy directly from the farm or group of farms. There is no middleman.
2. The farm provides member families with high quality, healthy, nutrient-dense, fresh and preserved, local and low fossil-fuel food or fiber, filling the share primarily with products grown on the farm or, if purchased from other farms, clearly identified as to origin.
3. Farm members commit to the CSA, sharing the bounty and the risks of farming by signing an agreement with the CSA and paying some part in advance, even as little as two weeks for those on Food Stamps.
4. The farm nurtures biodiversity through healthy production that is adapted to the rhythm of the seasons and is respectful of the natural environment, of cultural heritage, and that builds healthy soils, restores soil carbon, conserves water and minimizes pollution of soil, air and water.
5. Farmers and members commit to good faith efforts for continuous development of mutual trust and understanding, and to solidarity and responsibility for one another as co-producers.
6. Farm members respect the connection with the land upon which the CSA grows their food and strive to learn more and to understand the nature of growing food in their locale.
7. Farmers practice safe-handling procedures to ensure that the produce is safe to eat and at its freshest, tastiest, and most nutritious
8. CSA prices reflect a fair balance between the farmers' needs to cover costs of production and pay living wages to themselves and all farm workers so that they can live in a dignified manner, and members' needs for food that is accessible and affordable.
9. Farmers consult with members, take their preferences into account when deciding what crops to grow and communicate regularly about the realities of the farm.
10. Farm members commit to cooperation with the community of members and to fulfill their commitments to the CSA.
11. Farmers commit to using locally adapted seeds and breeds to the greatest extent possible.
12. The CSA seeks paths to social inclusiveness to enable the less well-off to access high quality food and commits to growing the CSA movement through increasing the number of CSAs and collaboration among them.