

CSA Shares in Cities- how to get access to urban consumers

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Just Food is a non-profit organization located in New York City. We have been working since 1995 to create a more sustainable food system within New York City and the surrounding region. Just Food runs five major programs: CSA in NYC, The City Farms, Community Food Education, and our Food Justice Program.

Just Food began in 1995 with advocacy efforts to support regional small scale farming. In 1996, the CSA in NYC program was created to expand the CSA model in New York only one of which already existed in New York City at the time. In 1991, Roxbury Farm partnered with city residents to create the first CSA in the city. In 1996, with Roxbury Farm's assistance, Just Food brought together other regional farmers and city residents who were interested in starting CSAs. From this meeting six additional CSAs were created for the 1996 season. Since that time Just Food has continued to partner farmers and NYC community members to start CSAs each year resulting in 50 CSAs throughout the five boroughs of New York City in 2007 partnered with 18 CSA farmers and over 30 farmers providing additional products to the CSA such as fruit, meat, eggs, dairy and flowers. To this total we anticipate adding 7-10 additional CSA sites in the city and 3-5 new CSA farms for the 2008 season.

In the past two years with the increased interest nationwide in local food and more people than ever paying attention to where their food is coming from we have seen a tremendous increase in knowledge of and interest in CSA in New York City. I believe that this is a trend that is being seen in many other urban areas as well. I believe that this is one of many reasons that there is great opportunity for small scale farmers in cities right now. Urban areas provide a concentration of consumers that is difficult to find in many rural and suburban areas. CSA is one way for small scale farmers to take advantage of this concentrated market potential and meet the growing demand for healthy, high quality, local food in urban areas.

I would like to take some time to talk about the some of the inherent differences between CSAs located in urban areas and CSAs at the farm or even in suburban areas. I will also share some of the strategies that Just Food has developed with farmers and community groups to make CSA work in New York City. Although developed for NYC, I believe that most of these strategies can be adapted to any CSA in an urban setting.

One of the primary differences between urban and rural CSAs is that it is usually impossible for city residents to make it to the farm each week to pick up their share. This necessitates the farmer taking on the responsibility of delivering the CSA shares to a distribution site within the city each week throughout the season. In NYC, these distribution sites are located in a variety of different settings such as churches, synagogues, schools, community centers, community gardens, restaurants and cafes.

Because the farmer is taking on the added tasks of packing and delivery and because CSA members are not able to get to the farm to contribute volunteer time to the farm, in urban settings the members can take on responsibilities of CSA management in the city. These tasks can include doing outreach and signing up members, collecting and tracking payments, finding the distribution space and running the distribution each week, producing a weekly newsletter and planning community building activities such as potlucks and farm trips. In New York each CSA has a “Core Group”, a group of 5-10 members of the CSA, who step up to take on more of the responsibility for these tasks. Which of these tasks the Core Group is responsible for varies based on the preference and needs of the group and farm they work with. In addition to decreasing the work of the CSA for the farmer, it is often helpful for farmers to pass some of these tasks, such as outreach, on to their members since the members are more familiar with their community and are able to reach people on a regular basis.

City based members taking on the responsibility of managing the CSA distribution is particularly helpful to farmers providing for urban CSAs. While overall management is the responsibility of one or more of the Core Group members, each CSA member is expected to contribute a certain amount of time (4-6 hours per season) to the CSA usually by being at the distribution. At the distribution volunteers are responsible for setting up and closing down the distribution, checking people in as they come to pick up their share, making sure bins of vegetables are full, and explaining the week's share to members. (In NYC most farmers do not pre-box members' shares. They send vegetables down in bulk in reusable bins or flats with a list of what each member receives and members put together their own shares. The reusable bins are then stored for the week at the distribution site and picked up the following week when full ones are brought down.)

One of the primary drawbacks of providing for CSA in the city or, for that matter, of being a CSA member in a city is the lack of direct interaction with the farm and farmers. This is unfortunate but somewhat inevitable and groups in NYC have developed a myriad of ways to increase the feeling of connection. One very important way is providing a weekly newsletter (or some type of weekly communication) for CSA members. This newsletter is sometimes created by the farm or sometimes by the community group with a contribution by the farm. A letter from the farm in a newsletter is a great opportunity for farmers to talk to members about both the exciting and challenging things that are happening on the farm. For example, because members might be a good distance from the farm they may not have any idea of what the weather has been like at the farm or what is happening in the progress of the season. This is the farmer's opportunity to tell them. We have found that good communication helps members understand changes in their share over time (seasonality), any crop that were lost and why, and results in better educated and more understanding membership.

Other strategies for increasing the member and farmer connection is planning at least one trip to the farm each season (or more if you are up for it!), providing a way for members to ask and receive answers to questions from the farmer, and creating opportunities for the farmers to attend CSA events such as potlucks and outreach events in the city during the off season when they have the time. The more connected that your members can feel to the farm the more committed to supporting the farm they will be.

While in NYC Just Food is available to help community groups and farmers to negotiate the division of labor and to help core group members learn from the 12 years of collective CSA management experience there are many ways that groups can develop in other cities as well. One practical way is the CSA in NYC Toolkit that Just Food offers which provides many of our resources that can be tailored to other city groups. Additionally, although initially the groups might rely heavily on the farmers for guidance on how to manage the CSA, once there are groups within a urban area they can work together and learn from each other to share their experiences ideas, resources and knowledge. I think that it would be very exciting for farmers to work together to develop CSA city group networks that can pass their strategies and management skills pass on to new groups.

While there are challenges to developing CSAs within urban settings there are also huge benefits. You will tap into a growing and excited pool of members who can bring both financial support and a richness of diversity to your farm. You will help to increase access to fresh, healthy local food to communities where it is often challenging to find it and you will help educate children and their parents in seasonality, the real taste of vegetables, and how their food grows.