



Propagation for Community Supported Agriculture

Most amateur and allotment growers either propagate their own plants or may buy things like peppers or cucumbers from garden centres. Once you start to scale up production, the window sill rapidly becomes full, and unless you have significant heated space to grow your seedlings on, it is difficult to raise large numbers of good quality plants.

Here are some options that are worth considering.

Linking up with other local growers and CSA farms

If one grower has more space or facilities then it can make sense for them to propagate for a group of growers. You need to have confidence that they are competent, and it is worth having some formal agreement in place. If you are relying on plants arriving and they do not, or they are poor quality there need to be guidelines in place as to how you deal with this.

Alternatively you could split the propagation, with one grower doing all the brassicas for instance and another all the leeks. This helps to keep the job simpler which should lead to improved quality and reduced labour.

If you are not certified organically then you can approach any local grower to do this for you (local colleges often have good facilities and may be willing to take on small contracts). If you are certified, you will need to work with other certified growers to maintain your license.

Buying from garden centres

Although this is likely to be too expensive for many crops, you may be able to negotiate a wholesale price, particularly from smaller privately owned garden centres.

For crops such as tomatoes, cucumbers etc even if you have to pay £1 per plant, you can easily pay that in time, water, heat, etc to raise small numbers of plants. Do your sums on propagation, it takes a lot of time at a busy period to look after plant raising and particularly at the start of a CSA you may be better off buying some plants in and focusing your efforts on growing them on. As your skill / infrastructure improve you can gradually take on more of your own propagation.

Buying direct from professional propagators

This is usually more relevant for larger operations as some propagators have minimum order numbers, but again clubbing together with other CSAs or local growers can really help to reduce costs. Prices vary depending on company and cost of seed, but as an example a tray of 240 lettuce might cost around £15, or around 6p per plant – this is a fraction of the overall cost of growing that lettuce to harvest. As there are very few organically certified propagators transport costs can make this option unaffordable for remote growers and CSAs, but if you can share delivery with another local grower this helps.

Bare root transplants

These are not readily available to buy (though again a local grower may be willing to produce them for you). But they are seriously worth considering for certain crops – mainly brassicas and leeks.

Essentially you sow the seed thickly in drills in the soil at the same time as you would in a module. Keep it weeded and watered until ready to plant out and then uproot it and plant immediately. They often look a bit sad for a couple of days but then pick up and often produce a better plant than a module grown one. They are much cheaper and easier to grow than modules. For early crops you may need to start the plants off in a tunnel or under a cloche.

Producer membership of the Soil Association gives you access to our full list of organically certified plant raisers, as well as a wide range of other professional services and advice, and reduced price tickets to Soil Association events. You don't need to be certified organic to benefit from producer membership.

For more information see:

www.soilassociation.org/farmersgrowers/producermembership