



Quantities

How many members should you have?

How many members you can supply with a share of the produce depends on the initiative you have in mind. It could be as few as 10-15 but is usually between 50-100 for vegetable-producing schemes. Some larger, more established CSAs with large-scale machinery supply even more members.

If you are trying to raise funds via crowdfunding or a community share offer you will want to recruit as many people as possible, so may end up with thousands of “members” or shareholders, although they won’t all be buying produce on a weekly basis.

It is generally a good idea to start small and then expand, rather than try to take on too much at the start. You will learn by experience, and the first members tend to be “early adopters” who are more tolerant of mistakes and are keen to be involved in an innovative initiative.

Members who join once you are established often have more mainstream expectations, so it is good to iron out the early wrinkles before they get involved. Once you are established and have a good customer base you may be able to acquire more land and grow more or different crops, or have other types of produce. This will help you expand your membership.

Be very clear what you can and can’t offer to members. It is very tempting to try to keep everyone happy, for example by offering customised veg boxes to satisfy individual preferences. But this can become extremely time-consuming, particularly as you scale up.

If you start small, think carefully about how you organise all interactions with members to ensure it will be straightforward to take on new people. A five-minute chat with every member every week may be fine when there are 10 members, but not when there are 50!

For example, make it very clear and be strict about how and when members can cancel veg boxes. Make sure this mechanism will still work when your head grower or a key member of the administration is on holiday.

How much should you grow?

You will need to work out what the land can feasibly produce (acreage, the fertility and quality of the soil, how much space each plant needs, rainfall levels in your area). How many people will be farming it - preparing the soil, planting out, watering, weeding, thinning, etc? How much time will they have to dedicate to it? What scale of machinery will you buy (if any)?

You will need to decide whether you plan to buy in some veg from other farms to fill any gaps in your own supply. If your goal is to cover the costs of production and pay a full-time head grower a decent wage (say £10/hr) then, as a rule of thumb, you’ll need 70-80 members.

Consider how many members you (aim to) have and how much produce they want to eat each week. A rough rule-of-thumb calculation for the number of veg shares per acre is 15, but treat that figure with caution. You may well produce less in the early years while the soil is improving and you are learning. A particularly productive site with a skilled grower may produce more.



How many animals should you keep?

With livestock you will largely be governed by how much space you have for them, the type of pasture, and the time and dedication that you and any volunteers are willing to put into caring for them. While many volunteers love to get involved with animals (they can be more entertaining than vegetables) you must be able to guarantee that someone can check on them at least twice a day every day (water, food and general health).

Importantly someone must be on call at all times in case there is a problem like ill health or escape. Ensure you have funds to cover vets' bills which can be extremely expensive.

Vigorous traditional breeds tend to be healthier and better able to deal with outdoor conditions. You can sell their meat for a good price, though the animals will be slower growing than "high octane" modern breeds.

US farming Guru Joel Salatin of Polyface Farm insists that all animals should be moved on to fresh ground every two weeks to keep both the soil and the animals healthy and avoid parasite build-up. This is time consuming but worth it, particularly if you have volunteers who enjoy working with animals.

Ask local farmers and smallholders for advice on stocking rates. Much will depend on local conditions but also look further afield for innovative solutions.

Electric fences have transformed how animals can be kept. This means for instance that the old fixed pig pen with heavy unmovable ark is no longer a necessity.

You could build your own lightweight pig ark out of waste plastic and pallets and move the pigs to a new patch to dig every fortnight. They enjoy eating perennial weeds, though they won't eliminate them.

How to find suppliers

Many people setting up CSAs are new to growing or caring for livestock on a smallholder scale. It is important to adjust and seek wholesale supplies to keep costs down.

Often word of mouth is the best bet. Searching on the internet is not always the best way to find the best-value suppliers.

You'll be rushed off your feet, particularly in the early days, but make the time to visit other local smallholdings and market gardens and join a local smallholding society, if there is one. They can offer invaluable local advice on good suppliers and being embedded in the local community can be a huge advantage, particularly if you need advice or an equipment loan in a rush.

Also build in time to visit or meet people from projects that are similar to yours, even if you have to travel some distance. They will be able to advise you on good suppliers (along with offering endless other invaluable time-saving ideas and encouragement). Contact the CSA Network UK to find out about regional events, mentoring or farm visits.

How much should you charge?

You will need to work out much to charge for a CSA veg share, either on an annual, monthly or weekly basis. This needs to take into account all the costs of production but you will also need to compare your prices with other similar schemes to make sure it is still affordable.

You can compare prices with other CSAs, organic food at supermarkets, and the Soil Association organic price data [soilassociation.org/farmers-growers/market-information/price-data](https://www.soilassociation.org/farmers-growers/market-information/price-data) Regular payments in advance avoid credit control problems, which are both time consuming and stressful, particularly during the busiest moments of the growing season.

Make sure you take holidays into account. Many CSAs base their annual prices on 48 weeks rather than 52 weeks, which avoids having to deal with altered payments.

Avoid underpricing your produce. As a CSA you are offering a genuinely valuable “farm experience” as well as “just” ultra-fresh, seasonal, local food. Many new small businesses set prices too low, and it is very hard to raise them once you are established.

Most CSAs operate in a policy and regulatory framework that makes remaining financially viable a challenge. The CSA Network UK and partner organisations are lobbying very hard to change this. The public are very interested in what you are offering so make the most of this goodwill through good communications with your members. They will value the produce more and as a result be more tolerant of variations in the quality and quantity of produce.

Eggs are a cheap supermarket commodity. So market your eggs emphasising the extremely high welfare and nutritional quality. The egg supply will vary considerably through the year. One solution is to sell egg shares consisting of a fixed, specified number of boxes of eggs (say ten) for a fixed price that will be added to veg shares as and when they are available. This evens out the demand to match your supply and educates members on the realities of a seasonal food supply.

Selling meat from your farm can be a complicated, expensive and time-consuming business unless you already have a freezer and/or fridge set-up approved by council environmental health officers.

A cheaper and simpler option is to liaise with a friendly local butcher and sell meat shares to be collected from the shop, following delivery from the abattoir.

Standard shares are a half pig or one eighth cow, and you may like to show customers the breakdown of the butchery costs alongside the cost of the meat. In agreement with the butcher, offer a limited time window in which people can collect their shares.

OTHER USEFUL LINKS AND RESOURCES



- ▶ Work out how many animals you can realistically have using livestock units accidentalsmallholder.net/smallholding/grassland-management/livestock-units
- ▶ Many farmers have a copy of the John Nix farm management notebook - it's very useful when it comes to working out inputs vs outputs for farms on all scales (though note it refers mostly to non-organic methods) thepocketbook.biz
- ▶ The Organic Growers Alliance organicgrowersalliance.co.uk is a friendly and useful community of growers across the UK who can offer practical advice, and their newsletter has adverts from useful suppliers.