



Zero waste

CSAs can make a big contribution to reducing the waste-stream associated with our food system and this is another selling point for your scheme that can help you attract more members.

The UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) says: *“Rejection of food products on the basis of aesthetic or safety concerns is a major cause of food losses and waste. In some cases, farmers discard between 20-40% of their fresh produce because it doesn’t meet retailer’s cosmetic specifications.”*

The Institute of Mechanical Engineers goes further: *“In the UK much is lost through the supply chain and through supermarket practices and this is particularly true with vegetables. Up to 30% of our vegetables are not harvested because they fail to meet supermarket standards.”*

Nigel Baker from Coventry University used Canalside Community Food in a comparative analysis of community supported agriculture and UK supermarkets. He found that the waste generated by Canalside as a food system was a fraction of that generated by the supermarket system. Avoidable food waste (AFW) on the farm at Canalside was less than 1%. The average 6.1% AFW for its members was five times lower than the 30% national average for salad and vegetable waste.

When CSA members become more closely involved in producing food they become more aware of factors that affect the quality of produce. They are much more likely to accept completely edible but not absolutely perfect looking produce, such as wonky carrots or blemished apples, both of which would probably be rejected by supermarkets.

Urgenci’s European CSA Research Group says: *“A direct connection of people with agriculture contributes to an increased consciousness about natural resources. Less food is wasted when products like crooked cucumbers are valued.”* In a CSA there are no intermediaries and therefore no supply chain losses. The only waste is on the farm and at consumer level.

CSAs supply direct to the consumer so minimize the need for packaging. Plastic waste is greatly reduced as CSA farms use far less than supermarkets. Some items such as salad leaves do keep for longer when packed in plastic bags, and easily damaged foods like berries may need to be put in punnets. If you do “pick your own”, members can bring their own pots.

CSAs are better able to deal with gluts of produce, as these can simply be passed on to members, who get a bigger share when the harvest is good. If possible, set up adequate storage to keep produce like root vegetables, squashes and apples so that they can be put in shares over several months. A potato clamp is a simple way to store potatoes. Squash can be kept for a few weeks in a polytunnel, shed or cold frame so long as air can circulate all around them. In sandy soil carrots can be overwintered where they grew under a bed of straw applied in the autumn to minimise frost damage.

There will be times when there is simply too much of something to share among members or to store. This is when surpluses can be sold to other markets like local restaurants or turned into preserves like chutney, pickle or jam. You could donate it to your local foodbank or contact the Gleaning Network UK to arrange for volunteers to come help pick and donate it to charity.

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Some studies have shown that there is actually an increase in waste with CSAs, as people get more veg than they can cope with. Thompson & Coskuner-Bali call it “*an irrational volume of goods - in this sense of not being optimally synchronized with household consumption rates*”.

Researchers Cooley & Lass found that just under a quarter of CSA members they questioned were wasting food. In Perez, Allen, & Brown's survey just over a third of CSA members said they left community supported agriculture because they got too much food and ended up throwing too much away.

So it is important that you manage the amount of food you give to members. Consider offering different share sizes for different types of households. Avoid giving too many of the same types of produce like spinach, chard, cabbage and kale in the same box or in consecutive weeks.

CSAs can help by giving members information on storing produce and what to eat first, as well as recipe ideas (see Yummy food) for more unusual vegetables, those they get most frequently, or different cuts of meat. You need to listen to your members. Ask them what they prefer to eat and at the start of the season invite them to help decide what to grow.

Some of the ways that CSAs can help reduce waste include:

- ▶ Supplying produce in bags or boxes that can be returned and reused
 - ▶ Putting produce in loose into boxes unless packaging is needed to prevent damage
 - ▶ Asking members to recycle plastic punnets or bring them back so they can be reused
 - ▶ Using recyclable or compostable packaging where possible
 - ▶ Offering differing share sizes, so members can pick one most appropriate to their household
 - ▶ Making surplus fruit like apples and pears into juice or cider for sale, or to drink at events.
 - ▶ Getting a team together to make chutneys, jams
- or fermented foods. These can then go in the weekly share or be sold at events or markets.
- ▶ Donating any surplus produce that can't be used or any veg boxes that aren't picked up to charity, your local foodbank or food waste kitchens like Food Cycle.
 - ▶ Letting volunteers or staff take home any excess produce.
 - ▶ Organising meals when you have gluts and using everything up in a big pot of soup or curry
 - ▶ Feeding vegetable waste to livestock
 - ▶ Composting any other organic waste on the farm

Making use of other waste

CSAs can also sometimes make use of the waste produced by other local businesses. Using waste materials to support the farm can reduce costs, and is a great marketing story. Make contact with like-minded projects, and don't be afraid to ask even unlikely allies for help. You should check with the relevant authorities before accepting waste - for example the Environment Agency. For example:

- ▶ Tree surgeons are often delighted to give away woodchip which can be used on the farm for path and compost making; they usually have to pay to dispose of it otherwise.
- ▶ Local councils may be willing to give away damaged wheelie bins to a positive project like a CSA, which is a great way to store animal feed with protection from rain and rodents.
- ▶ Brewers may be able to provide spent hops to use as mulch.
- ▶ Building sites are a great source of wooden pallets which can be used to construct all sorts of useful things.
- ▶ Wood ash (from untreated wood, and not from coal fires) is a great additive to compost heaps (in small amounts) and as a slug barrier. Ask your members if anyone has a fire or wood burner and provide a bin for them to drop off the cooled ash.