

Steps to a Solidarity Economy

Food co-ops and community-supported agriculture projects

BY ELIZABETH HENDERSON

Cooperation among cooperatives is a basic principle of the co-op movement. In Kansas, New York, and Massachusetts, food co-ops are applying this concept in a creative way: providing deep and solid support for local food systems by hosting drop-off points where the members of community-supported agriculture (CSA) farms pick up their shares. The CSAs attract new members from among co-op shoppers, and the co-ops enjoy busy shopping hours when CSA members turn to the co-op for items that do not come in their farm shares.

These days, only a small percentage of the CSAs fit the definition of a cooperative or even of a true CSA. To earn its name, a CSA should involve shared risk between farmer and customer, and practical sharing of the important work of producing food. Subscription-style box schemes provide service with customized orders and even home deliveries, but it is really stretching the definition of CSA to include them. A few CSAs are full-scale farmer-consumer cooperatives where everybody works. Besides CSAs with member involvement, there are also multi-farm CSAs in which two or more farms cooperate, and a few of these are legally established as farmer-owned cooperatives.

The Rolling Prairie Farmers Alliance, a farmer-owned cooperative with six member farms, has been operating a CSA with its main pickup point at Community Mercantile Co-op (The Merc) in Lawrence, Kansas, since 1994. Once a week, 100 CSA members pick up their shares at The Merc. According to Front End Manager Zac Hamlin, The Merc is a big store in a small building, so the CSA members add a lot of traffic and excitement on



Genesee Valley Organic CSA members pick up their shares at Abundance Natural Food Co-op in Rochester, N.Y.

Monday afternoons, which can be a slow time at co-op stores.

Rolling Prairie brings a lively “buzz” to the store that attracts attention and interest. Careful management of this traffic is important, but Hamlin reports that CSA members and Bob Lominska, the farmer who coordinates the site for Rolling Prairie, are easy to work with. Lominska says the same thing about Hamlin and appreciates his enthusiasm for the partnership. Hamlin’s observation is that the CSA members plan their shopping so that they can also buy items at the co-op that are not in their shares.

While there may be some competition with the produce department, Hamlin believes that the CSA introduces members to foods they had not tried before that they continue to want after the local farming season. In the long run, they become better customers for the co-op produce section. For the first few years, Nancy O’Connor, who ran the deli section at The Merc, cooked dishes featuring Rolling Prairie crops to help customers learn how to use new foods. This led to the creation of the Rolling

Prairie Cookbook that the CSA still provides to new members.

From the farmers’ point of view, the co-op connection attracts members who would not otherwise learn about the CSA. The Merc encourages co-op shoppers to join by distributing Rolling Prairie brochures and featuring the CSA in newsletter articles in March or April each year. Hamlin notes that the CSA pickup allows shoppers to make a closer connection with the farmers. They can chat with Lominska, ask questions about the Rolling Prairie farms, and then are more likely to buy the produce from these farms in the co-op produce section. In all these years, there have been no conflicts between Rolling Prairie and The Merc, an unblemished win-win.

Rolling Prairie got started with help from the USDA Agricultural Cooperative Service, which provides support for groups of farmers who want to form co-ops, including templates for by-laws and other legal documents. These days, Rolling Prairie CSA has three dropoff points in addition to The Merc and serves over 300 households. The co-op pays farmer members to perform such tasks as bookkeeping, quality control, and overseeing distribution sites. In some years, they offer farm visits and work days, but member labor is not central to this CSA.

Four farms of widely varying sizes make up the Common Wealth CSA, which has been holding its weekly pickup in the walkway next to the Greenfields Market in Greenfield, Mass., since 1998. The former General Manager Jim DeLuca recalls that far from cutting into co-op sales, the tables outside the store displaying CSA vegetables actually stimulated non-members to head for the produce department. ▶

www.zingtrain.com

ZingTRAIN
Zingerman's Training Incorporated

Ask us about our NCGA member discount
Call 734.930.1919 or visit
www.zingtrain.com

**Innovative Training and Tools for
Cultivating Your Co-op**

If you've been considering open book finance,
there's never been a better time...

fun, flavorful finance

Upcoming Ann Arbor seminar:
August 29-30, 2011 • 8am-4pm • \$975

This seminar will teach you solid, ethically-oriented ways to make great finance a successful part of the organization at every level instead of just hiding it in the accounting office.

GUARANTEED to provide tools to reduce leadership stress and surely get the whole team on board, making financial success an activity everyone can participate in.



◀ Though not a formal farmer-owned co-op, Common Wealth provides a market for a few very small farms that would not be able to handle a CSA on their own. Ryan Voiland's Red Fire Farm supplies over half the produce and could easily do without his tiny colleagues. Voiland, 32, says he likes to keep in touch with CSA supporters in the Greenfield area where he got his start as a farmer at the age of 12 and where he learned a lot from tax resisters Wally and Juanita Nelson about how to live on very little and to farm with integrity. Wally Nelson has passed away and Juanita no longer contributes to the CSA, but the spirit of cooperation they lived by still resonates in the Greenfield community.

Inspired by the Rolling Prairie-Merc combination, after the Genesee Food Store in Rochester, N.Y., was reborn as the Abundance Co-op in 2001, the Genesee Valley Organic CSA (GVOCSA) asked to use the warehouse space as its dropoff point. Abundance agreed to rent 200 square feet to the GVOCSA, enough room for an 8'x8' walk-in cooler and a little storage space for folding tables, boxes and a phone. My farm partner Greg Palmer and I built the walk-in, and a CSA member who is an engineer installed an air-conditioner on a timer. Since we only use the cooler two days a week, we did not need an expensive compressor. Although Abundance never asked for payment, the CSA contributes a modest \$600 annual fee. Abundance General Manager Jim DeLuca estimates that the CSA uses \$30 to \$40 of electricity per month.

At the extreme end of the farmer-member cooperation scale, the GVOCSA requires a work contribution from everyone involved. It is a member-farmer cooperative, a hybrid enterprise blending worker control and customer control. Officially, the farm and the CSA are separate legal entities: Peacework Farm is an LLC, and the GVOCSA is an unincorporated association (a buying club). But all GVOCSA members either contribute to administrative tasks by serving on the core group or do work shifts helping with harvesting and distribution. We started the GVOCSA this way in 1988–89, and we have elaborated upon our system for over 22 years and expanded to 300 households. (You can read details on the website: www.gvocsa.org.)

Similar to Mondays at The Merc, the GVOCSA brings lots of activity to Abundance on Thursday and Sunday evenings. In good weather, distribution is in the open in the store parking area near the entrance. Everyone shopping can see the tables full of food and staffed by volunteers who are having a good time, often with their children helping with weighing and other tasks.

DeLuca reports that there is a pleasant atmosphere to the CSA pickup time and that it's "fun to watch the volunteers, who are not farmers, working for their food and taking satisfaction in making their contribution to sustainable agriculture." Over the years, there have been a few issues—too many empty produce boxes attracting mice, and people who show up a day late for their shares—but

GVOCSA core members have been responsive and thoughtful about working them out with the store. Overall, DeLuca concludes, having the GVOCSA at Abundance has been "nothing but a delight."

Building solidarity between co-ops and CSAs has practical advantages and, at the same time, contributes to deep social transformation. To build a future for ourselves and our communities that is grounded in ecological realities, we need to learn how to live and work together. Through cooperation, we can contribute to creating a solidarity economy based on local food systems that are clean, organic, and fair, and provide the quality of life we want for our families, friends, and neighbors. ■

Resources

- **Sharing the Harvest: A Citizen's Guide to Community Supported Agriculture** (Chelsea Green, 2007), for extensive information on starting and running a CSA.
- Jill Perry and Scott Franzblau have documented the experience of forming a farmer-owned cooperative CSA in a detailed guide entitled **Local Harvest: A Multi-farm CSA Handbook** that is available as a free download from NESARE. Local Harvest covers organization, quality control, crop allocation, and internal and external pricing.



What's in a Jar of Once Again?

We develop and support:

- Domestic and international fair trade
- Small organic farms and cooperatives
- Educational, medical and employment programs in Nicaragua
- Our annual donations provide assistance to impoverished Americans, disaster victims, and community support efforts
- We have been employee-owned since 1976

You embrace our values with the purchase of every jar of Once Again.
Together... we spread integrity.



Visit our web site for product information and recipes
www.OnceAgainNutButter.com
Follow us on 