

CSA Start-up

Holland Farm
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We got the opportunity to operate the Holland Farm in fall of 2007. We had a business plan and a notebook full of ideas. Our first season farming was our first season running the CSA. The CSA is our main source of income for the farm.

The farm is 89 acres of fields and woods. Everything but the land right around the house is in a conservation easement. We have a lease arrangement with the owners of the farm. That fall of 2007 we put a nice wooden sign out front saying "Holland Farm CSA coming spring of 2008." It had my name and the website address. The house was under complete renovation and people's curiosity brought them to the website. We answered endless emails of "what's a CSA" and "how does it work". Our local paper did an article on the renovation and the future plans for the farm. It worked, we met our first season member goal of 95 and we had 30 people on a wait list. In 2009 we had 147 members.

Our website is vital. We also have listings on Local Harvest.org. Our listing gets hundreds of hits per year. Local Harvest only asks for a small yearly donation. It's well worth it.

We grow on about 5 acres of rock free sandy soil. We grow pesticide free but use both organic and conventional fertilizer. We grow on 4 ft. wide black plastic mulch rows with drip irrigation. Almost all of our fertilizing is done through the drip. Between the rows I plant a cover of clover and grass. It's mowed once a week with a 5 ft. finish mower. We grow things like salad mix and arugula in open soil beds. We have a small 14x 48 greenhouse where I plant 96 greenhouse tomatoes. All our seedlings are grown in hoop houses on my parent's farm across town.

Our CSA has full memberships and half memberships. We don't call them shares. A half membership is adequate for 2 adults. A full is adequate for a small family of 4 or 2 vegetarians. Members are not required to work on the farm.

We don't box the pickups. Members come to the farm once a week on their chosen day. We offer Tuesday/Thursday or Saturday for pick up. Member's names are checked off a list. All the vegetables are rinsed and put up in the farm stand. Things like radishes and carrots are kept loose. Each item has a sign saying what it is and the quantity to choose. If they don't like it they don't take it. Quantity is determined by the level of membership. The sign also has a space for the retail price to the public. We laminate the signs so we can change them and reuse them. We have a "seconds" table where members can help themselves. We have a large table that we fill with buckets of fresh herbs. Members take what they like and will use. We go through a lot of basil. We had about 200 ft. of double row basil last year.

Last year we offered pick your own flowers for an additional \$40.00/ season. We grew 9 rows 75 ft. long of snapdragons, zinnias, asters, dahlias, cosmos and fillers. Flower members bring their own clippers and buckets. The flowers were ready in mid July. They picked 10 to 15 stems each week. We had 35 flower pickers.

We have a large pick your own area in the garden. Members pick their own green and yellow beans, hot peppers and cherry tomatoes. Not picking beans for 150 people is huge. The members really enjoy the pyo. It gets the kids involved. People socialize and have fun when they're out there. They find out fast that picking beans isn't that much fun. They usually reach their "fun max" at about a pound without us setting a limit. Cherry tomatoes we say "pick about a pint". We'll pick some beans and cherry tomatoes and keep them under the counter for our favorite little old ladies. It makes them happy that they get special treatment.

It's proven to be very important to have someone outgoing and knowledgeable running the pickup. The high school kids are ok but a chatty adult who knows how to cook makes a huge difference. We encourage members to add recipes to our bulletin board. This Summer I think we'll have some cooking contests.

Our animals are real popular with our members. We have four goats and between 150 and 200 laying hens. Members can visit with the goats and feed the chickens bread they bring from home or scraps from the wash area. Our eggs are available for sale. They are not included in the CSA. Communication with the members has also proven to be very important. We use Constant Contact.com to send e-mail updates to members year round. We don't send them every week, just when something's going on. Constant Contact is reasonably priced and it's fun. We have a large white board in the farm stand that members look to for the "Coming soon" veggies and crop updates. The spring start of the CSA is the time we really have to focus on good communication. Many members are new and they are unsure of what to do and how things work. A good person in the stand helps by letting new members know that as the garden matures the bounty increases. New members get nervous when they just keep getting greens and radishes. Our members sign up with a membership agreement form. It states our commitment to provide fresh pesticide free vegetables in reasonable quantities at pick up, also to provide a positive farm experience, and to stay committed to our members as they are the back bone of the Holland Farm. They have a commitment to use also. We ask that they accept fluctuation in harvests due to weather, to pick up on their selected day or send someone else, and to understand that the CSA is one form of revenue produced on the farm. We also have a small farm stand and attend a farmer's market. The form is available off our website. We accept cash, checks and PayPal. We have one strict rule. If you can't pick up on your day you need to send someone to pick up for you. Members are not allowed to change days. Having friends and neighbors pick up while people are off on vacation works well for us because it exposes more people to our CSA. We've gotten a couple new members this way.

Members choose their pick up day when they sign up. We accept 50 members each day. Our days are Tuesday 11:00 – 6:00, Thursday 11:00 – 6:00 or Saturday 9:00-5:00. They can come by anytime during these hours. Picking and quantities can get tricky to make sure we don't give out too much stuff on one day and come up short the next pick up day. I get nervous in the mornings. I think "we'll never make it and we have no food today." We always make it fine.

I always try to be positive about the crops in front of the customers. They have pre paid and trusted me to produce quality vegetables for them. Showing confidence in myself and not whining about the weather or bugs gives them confidence in me. Once again good communication has paid off for us in the past. Last spring we delayed pickups one week because of the rainy weather. An e-mail to members letting them know what was going on worked great. Not one complaint.

We use Quick Books '08 for our book keeping. I like it because it's easy enough for me to use and the paperwork is professional. We use Quick Books for payroll also. Using their payroll is very easy and quick.

We have a line of credit with First Pioneer Farm Credit. First Pioneer also does the taxes for the farm.