

SUMMER 2013

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# FARMING GOES LOCAL

Community-supported agriculture projects are putting people back in touch with where their food comes from as well as enhancing the landscape, as **Clare Hargreaves** discovers

## THERE'S ONE DIETARY REQUIREMENT THAT

every inhabitant of our planet shares: food. But how we obtain that food is becoming problematic. With huge agribusinesses and supermarkets now responsible for growing, processing and selling our food, many have lost sight of how it's actually produced. You only need to look at the horsemeat scandal for evidence of that. Or visit an inner-city primary school, as I did recently, whose kids think carrots grow on bushes, and have never visited a farm.

This food system may provide us with cheap food, but that can be at a huge cost to the environment and



## 'Community-supported agriculture is increasingly appealing as an answer to concerns about sustainability'

rural communities. For every calorie we get out, we're putting in ten – in the form of cheap fossil fuels used in fertilisers and pesticides, farm machinery, and trucks that distribute food from centralised hubs. That makes our system very vulnerable – these resources will one day run out – and contributes to greenhouse gas emissions, too. Small-scale farms and market gardens, which have shaped and cared for our landscapes over centuries, are unable to compete with large ones and are disappearing fast.

As individuals, many have lost any connection with food or those producing it. And we're losing the skills of growing, preparing and cooking it, too. Concerns over issues such as these have spawned an alternative, grass-roots approach to food production known as Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA) that's already popular in the US, Japan and France. A CSA is a partnership between farmers and people in a local community. The great thing is that it benefits all: consumers reconnect with the land and enjoy fresh, high-quality food produced in an environmentally



Top: Chagford in Dartmoor, where Cob Samson works on the field to supply local goods to surrounding villages Above: Sibling team Ben and Charlotte Hollins who run Fordhall Farm in Shropshire

friendly way, while producers share the risks of production and benefit from having a secure market.

'Community-supported agriculture is increasingly appealing as an answer to concerns about resilience, sustainability and transparency in the food system,' says Rachel Harries at the Soil Association, which has been offering practical support to wannabe CSAs under the Big Lottery-funded Making Local Food Work scheme. 'In Japan, they call this Food with a Face, as people know who's growing their food.'

Soil Association research has shown that CSAs tend to manage their land for the benefit of local distinctiveness and biodiversity, with 55% of projects planting hedges and trees and 61% introducing new wildlife areas. As well as enhancing the landscape, CSAs also encourage people to engage with it – over 53% of initiatives have made their land more accessible to the public.

Rachel estimates there are now over 80 CSAs, representing more than 0.2% of farm income. And the number is growing. However, CSA is a broad umbrella that can't be defined by any particular model. Some projects start with a producer looking for subscribers to enable them to establish, in return for a share of their produce. Others are started by communities forming cooperatives that acquire land and produce food on it using volunteers. And it's not just vegetables – there are CSAs producing shearing lambs, apples, bread, wine and fish.

**THE IDEA TO SET UP A CSA IN THE VILLAGE OF** Chagford, in Dartmoor, for example, came out of a public meeting in 2008 at which those attending decided they wanted to slash the distance between food consumers and producers. Villagers found a landowner willing to rent land for a horticultural garden. A lottery grant funded capital investments in things such as fencing and paid two full-time employees, and villagers were



Above: A local family feeding the grass-fed pigs at Fordhall Farm Below: Volunteers in Chagford get together every Thursday to harvest the produce, ready for packing

invited to buy shares in the harvest. To ensure as low an impact on the environment as possible, Chagfood (as it's called) uses horse-power: Samson, a Dartmoor-Welsh Cob, works on the field three days a week.

Having started by supplying 25 local households with a weekly veg box, Chagfood now supplies 73 and cultivates six acres. Since April 2012, the garden has paid its way. Every Thursday volunteers gather to harvest the fruit and veg and pack it for distribution. 'The highlight is our Harvest Day Lunch,' says Ed Hamer, a Chagfood CSA founder. 'Our aim has been to return to agriculture rather than agribusiness. What's been exciting has been putting the social side back into farming.'

It's a sentiment shared by Eddie Leggett, chair of a cooperative in the village of Clapham in the Yorkshire Dales. The group grows potatoes in a field loaned by a local farmer, and runs a Saturday morning exchange stall for locals to share their fruit and veg. It has also established 12 beehives to harvest honey, and set up its own allotment. Keen to pass on skills, it set aside a patch of the field for children to plant, weed and harvest their own spuds. 'Learning how to become self-sufficient builds resilience, and has created a wonderful network of people,' says Eddie. 'We're now looking for more land to expand. Maybe we'll do onions next!'



A different CSA is the Rent-a-Vine scheme run by Sedlescombe Vineyard around Bodiam Castle in East Sussex. This time, it's the farmer – Roy Cook – who initiated the CSA rather than the community. Members get discounts on Roy's organic wines and juices. They can also visit the vineyard and its nature trail, or attend wine tastings. Members can work on the vineyard as payment towards their subscription fee. The scheme has gained more than 200 members, most of whom received Rent-a-Vine membership as presents. 'The scheme has been a huge help to the vineyard as well as to its members,' says Roy.

At the other end of the scale, in terms of the size of its membership, is the community-owned CSA at Fordhall Farm, Shropshire ([www.fordhallfarm.com](http://www.fordhallfarm.com)). The 140-acre farm has over 8,000 shareholders, although unlike most schemes, they don't get a share of the produce (although they can buy its grass-fed beef, lamb and pork from the farm shop). Fordhall is managed by Ben Hollins and his sister Charlotte, who mustered the shareholders in 2005-06 in an attempt to raise the £800,000 needed to save the farm after being given eviction notices by their landowner. Those who chipped in £50 for shares included HRH The Prince of Wales, singer Sting and politician Zac Goldsmith.

## THE REASON FOR THE INTEREST THAT

Fordhall attracted was that it had been farmed by the Hollins family for three generations, and had been seen as a flagship for sustainable, wildlife-friendly farming.

'It's challenging for small farms to compete with large-scale producers,' says Charlotte who, with Ben, now leases the farm from the trust formed. 'We've shown that small-scale farming offers a viable way of life for generations to come.'





It's not only land-based enterprises that are using a CSA model. In 2008, Dan and Johanna McTiernan set up the country's first community-supported bakery in Slaithwaite in West Yorkshire. 'We'd just had our first child. We knew supermarket bread was full of rubbish and we wanted to be able to feed our son real, good stuff,' says Dan. After a bread-making course at River Cottage, Dan started baking, first for the family and then, as word got out how good he was, for friends.

Then came the idea to set up a community bakery, using a subscription model whereby members paid in advance for bread that the bakery made for them each week. The bakery started by renting ovens in a pizza restaurant, then found its own premises, funded by 'bread bonds'. Since then it's grown as fast as a sourdough starter, now producing more than 1,500 loaves a week and employing nine full-time directors. There's a busy café, too, where customers can see bread being made as they sip their cappuccinos.

With the success of the bakery ([www.thehandmadebakery.coop](http://www.thehandmadebakery.coop)), the need for subscriptions has diminished, says Matthew Betts, one of the founders. 'Things have evolved. Now people can come in and buy a loaf – although if they're subscribers they get a discount. The CSA model enabled us to establish the business and put people in touch with their food.'

So successful has the bakery been that it's helped others set up similar enterprises across the country. There are now 20 community bakeries, including in Birmingham and Manchester.



**IT MAY SEEM SURPRISING, BUT IT'S ACTUALLY** in the city that the first CSA started. A producer-community partnership called Growing Communities ([www.growingcommunities.org](http://www.growingcommunities.org)) was set up in east London in 1993. At first its efforts went into volunteering on farms, although now the emphasis is more on harnessing the buying power of the community to

support small-scale farmers around London who are producing food in a sustainable way. Its main outlets are a fruit and veg box scheme and Stoke Newington Farmers' Market. That's not to say members don't get their hands dirty: Growing Communities also runs urban market gardens producing salads sold through the box scheme and these sites are also providing training for apprentice growers. It recently opened a farm in Dagenham, too. Growing Communities now has an impressive 24 salaried staff and it's helping other communities across the country set up similar schemes.

'The majority of us now live in cities, so it's vital we find sustainable ways of feeding urban inhabitants,' says Kerry Rankine, Growing Communities' assistant director. 'There's not the land here for people to help on farms or grow their own, so we've set up links with farmers to supply produce for our fruit and veg boxes.'



**'THE SCHEME HAS MADE A BIG DIFFERENCE** to farmers and members,' says Kerry. It's certainly proved a lifeline for Martin Mackey, who grows vegetables and soft fruit at Ripple Farm in Kent. 'The security of the box scheme has helped us plan our growing, expand production and employ more people,' he says.

For consumers, there are many benefits, from better diet and health to being more adventurous in the kitchen and feeling they're making a difference to both farmers and the planet. Says one box-scheme member: 'On top of pushing us to be creative in cooking veg, the scheme has made me realise there's a way out of the supermarkets.'

**Above left:** Handmade Bakery's husband and wife founders, Dan and Johanna McTiernan

**Above right:** The Growing Communities team, which runs a community-led box scheme in Hackney

At a tiny CSA at the other end of London, an 'Edible Garden' in Westow Park in Crystal Palace, one resident said the project had got her friend's little boy eating vegetables for the first time. 'He never eats vegetables, but he couldn't get enough of the cucumbers we were growing. My friend was gobsmacked.' The community garden has embraced old as well as young: residents in the sheltered housing overlooking it are enjoying the contact with the gardeners and use the garden for walks.

Such stories leave little doubt as to the positive impact of CSAs. As Kerry from Growing Communities puts it, 'We take our current food system for granted, yet it's right on a knife edge. Changing our food system is fundamental – before it's too late.' The revolution has begun.



## Find out more

- 1 To find out about CSAs near you or get advice on how to set one up, a good starting point is Making Local Food Work, a group of six partner organisations (including CPRE): [www.makinglocalfoodwork.co.uk](http://www.makinglocalfoodwork.co.uk)
- 2 Visit [www.communitysupportedagriculture.org.uk](http://www.communitysupportedagriculture.org.uk) or join the CSA Facebook group: [www.facebook.com/CSACommunityUK](http://www.facebook.com/CSACommunityUK)
- 3 CPRE members can enjoy half-price admission [checking exact deal] to Sedlescombe Organic Vineyard in East Sussex: [www.englishorganicwine.co.uk](http://www.englishorganicwine.co.uk)
- 4 Want to support local food? Read CPRE's countrywide local food reports, and find out how to map your own local food web, at [www.cpre.org.uk/what-we-do/farming-and-food](http://www.cpre.org.uk/what-we-do/farming-and-food)