



Notes from the Field by Shawn McEntee

Late-season update for CSA Members

As you are already aware, the CSA has experienced some growing pains this year. We are going to make it to the end of the season and we are going to be able to pay our farmers for the wonderful produce they have been supplying, and will continue to supply through the week of Thanksgiving. A lot has happened over the season with finances and we've learned a lot in this first year with a new model.

Jay wrote our initial crop plan – what and how much would be supplied to CSA members over the growing season – and based the cost of bringing those crops to members on the best information he had in December of 2007 and January of 2008. This estimate was built around the quantity and variety of produce members indicated they wanted (remember our survey last year?) and what, given local growing conditions, is reasonable for our farmers; the projected cost of delivering the 'package' to members determined the price of the share for the 2008 season. Or rather, Jay's finesse with regard to what we said we wanted allowed him to offer us shares with more variety, if less quantity, at the same price as the 2007 share -- \$575 for the season. With a small cushion that was intended to cover the Pumpkin Party (thanks Ted) and perhaps leave the CSA with a small discretionary fund, \$575 was expected to cover the cost of bringing the quantity and variety of produce in the crop plan to members for the season.

And then fertilizer was more than twice the price Jay had used in his projections; and then the price of oil and fuel rose by half. And when we checked the market price of the produce our farmers were supplying, it was, in some cases, more than 3 times the projected costs of production. While slight fluctuations in production costs are to be expected, the size of these fluctuations – and the speed with which they affected the market – could not have been projected.

The whole idea of a CSA – Community Supported Agriculture – is that CSA members share the market, weather, and other fluctuations with the farmers for a guarantee that our farmers will share with us the best of what they have. Following those principles, and given that our farmers had an abundance of produce – some of which had cost them more to produce than

was projected in the crop plan – for the first half of the season, we'd paid the farmers an estimated 80% of the retail market price of the produce they were supplying. By early July, we realized we were paying farmers at a rate that was going to cause the CSA to run out of money before the end of the season. Since one of the principles of the CSA is to protect farmers, leaving them without paychecks in October and November just didn't seem right, so we began to explore price adjustments in what had already been supplied to the CSA and what had yet to be supplied.

Ultimately, we realized that we had no choice but to essentially return to the crop plan and to standardize prices for produce based on the estimates in the crop plan. Clearly the crop plan estimate under pays our farmers for some of their produce; the unexpected and rather dramatic increase in inputs affects some crops more than others. So, we standardized prices by adjusting a few up – and most down – and 'ran the numbers' to determine how much changes in payments to farmers would stretch CSA funds toward the end of the season. The new pricing structure 'returns' about \$11,000.00 to the CSA coffers; of course, this money has been paid out and our goal is to have a zero (NOT A NEGATIVE) balance in the CSA accounts at the end of the season. So, our farmers are going to experience 'short' paychecks from now until the end of the season – the amounts they have been 'over' paid will be taken, in proportionate chunks, from payments for what they supply between now and the end of the season. It's far from optimal but it's the best we can do without violating the principles of CSA.

As you may remember from my mid-season report, one of the problems our farmers encounter is a lack of market alternatives for their produce. Ideally for our farmers, the CSA would buy (the best of) their produce at 80% of retail market prices and, since the weekly cost of our shares is effectively stable, if costs of production rose dramatically, CSA members would get less produce (not less value). The farmers then, would be able to sell their 'excess' produce at retail market prices (having already supplied the CSA members). Unfortunately for our farmers, local markets will absorb only so much 'excess' so, if the volume of their production exceeds projected needs

of the CSA by more than a small margin – and they have to reduce the volume of what they supply to the CSA given increased costs – they effectively cannot sell much of the ‘excess’ produce. This also violates the ‘no waste’ principle of CSA and was the primary reason the volume of what we received this season has been what was projected or has exceeded what was projected. If the CSA has not absorbed it, it would have been left to rot – literally.

We obviously need to come up with a better plan for next year – a plan that will allow us to protect our farmers and our members from the vagaries of the market place and price fluctuations in inputs. While our farmers are being paid through the end of the season, and we have received the projected amounts of produce over the season, costs to our farmers have been much higher than expected – they are pinched and their profit margins are low to non-existent. Quite simply, the most obvious protection from this ‘problem’ is a larger cushion in the cost of each share so that, if production costs rise unexpectedly, we can pay our farmers accordingly, receive our projected produce and not run out of money before the end of the season. If costs of production don’t rise and there is a surplus, we can

either buy the surplus – or buy a portion of the surplus and have some seed money at the end of the year that we could invest in production for the following year. Or we could redistribute the ‘cushion’ in another way. These are just suggestions; no doubt there are a variety of ways to protect our farmers and ourselves in the future – we just need to put our heads together to figure it out.

by *Shawn McEntee*



The situation Shawn has described for you is a perfect example of the need for a core group. Shawn, Ted, Craig and I have spent countless hours trying to work out the most equitable solution. The core group helps guide the CSA and the farmers in decisions that affect us all. I have been asking some of the members about re-forming a core group for the past 3 years but nothing has happened. The multi-farm model is new territory for CSA's and our transition thus far has not been smooth, but I think with more input from the members it will be successful.

*Onward,
Jay*

Recipe of the week (<http://allrecipes.com>)

"These are a very welcome change from regular pancakes. Great with maple syrup or cranberry sauce."

Original recipe yield 24 pancakes

INGREDIENTS

- 3/4 pound sweet potatoes
- 1 1/2 cups all-purpose flour
- 3 1/2 teaspoons baking powder
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1/2 teaspoon ground nutmeg
- 2 eggs, beaten
- 1 1/2 cups milk
- 1/4 cup butter, melted

DIRECTIONS

1. Place sweet potatoes in a medium saucepan of boiling water, and cook until tender but firm, about 15 minutes. Drain, and immediately immerse in cold water to loosen skins. Drain, remove skins, chop, and mash.
2. In a medium bowl, sift together flour, baking powder, salt, and nutmeg. Mix mashed sweet potatoes, eggs, milk and butter in a separate medium bowl. Blend sweet potato mixture into the flour mixture to form a batter.
3. Preheat a lightly greased griddle over medium-high heat. Drop batter mixture onto the prepared griddle by heaping tablespoonfuls, and cook until golden brown, turning once with a spatula when the surface begins to bubble.

In Your Share This Week

The contents of the share were not available at press time. The amount of any particular crop at this point in the season frequently will not support a full distribution. Members are asked to watch the share bin for those items.