

# Workplace Community Supported Agriculture: Connecting Local Farms to Local Employers





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The project is located in North Carolina and includes the following participants:

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[www.rti.org](http://www.rti.org)

Brinkley Farms, Creedmoor  
The Growing Station, Wake Forest  
Hannah Creek Farm, Four Oaks  
Harland's Creek Farm, Pittsboro  
Mystic Farm, Pittsboro  
Nu Horizons Farm, Pittsboro  
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# Workplace Community Supported Agriculture: *Connecting Local Farms to Local Employers*



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## Preface

Community supported agriculture (CSA) is widely recognized as an effective way to build direct connections between small- and medium-sized farmers and local consumers. The most common CSA model involves a single farm that sells shares to individuals and families, and delivers products during the growing season at designated drop points, such as the farm, farmers markets, share members' homes, or other public spaces. One of the most significant challenges a farmer faces in developing a CSA is member recruitment. Currently, the most effective way to build CSA membership is by word of mouth (Kolodinsky and Pelch, 1997), which often results in a slow build-up of shareholder numbers.

Shareholder recruitment and retention depends on several factors, including consumer familiarity with the CSA concept and convenience of pick-up locations, among others. Many farmers have addressed these factors by approaching members of existing groups to recruit shareholders. Groups can be an effective way to share information about CSA, and they often have a shared location that members can conveniently access. Workplaces—including businesses, corporations, and other employers—represent potential groups of consumers that farmers could gain access to and inform about the value of CSA.

With funding from the Golden LEAF Foundation and North Carolina Cooperative Extension, the Center for Environmental Farming Systems initiated a program in 2002 to connect new and existing CSA farmers to a strong potential market for the CSA concept—employees of the Research Triangle Institute International (RTI), located in Research Triangle Park, North Carolina. As a host institution, RTI offered farmers these advantages:

- a pick-up location convenient to CSA shareholders (their place of employment),
- coordinated on-site opportunities for potential shareholders to meet with CSA farmers, and
- an internal communication network to promote the CSA concept and provide advertising for each farmer in the program.

The opportunity to market to this targeted audience allowed several local farmers to build new CSA programs and expand the membership of existing CSA enterprises.

This guide explains how to develop a workplace CSA program like that at RTI. It describes the process by which the RTI-CSA program was initiated and developed during the first three years of its existence. Based on the lessons learned at RTI, this guide can be a resource for workplaces, farmers, and others involved in workplace CSA:

- Potential host workplaces will find information on their responsibilities as CSA hosts and suggestions on how to effectively support a CSA farm or group of farms.
- CSA farmers will find this guide a valuable resource when considering whether to use a workplace CSA and how to do so. It contains sample materials that farmers can use when approaching potential host institutions, and it describes some CSA farms that have been successful in recruiting and retaining workplace shareholders.
- Cooperative Extension agents, universities, and nonprofit organizations interested in initiating a similar program will find information on developing workplace CSA projects.



# Community Supported Agriculture: Concepts and Challenges

## What Is CSA?

Direct marketing has proven to be a successful marketing strategy for many farmers, especially those with small and medium-sized farms that have difficulty competing with large operations in wholesale markets (USDA, 2000). One direct marketing channel that has seen considerable growth in recent years is *community supported agriculture* (CSA). In 2005, the year that marked the 20th anniversary of CSA in the United States, an estimated 1,700 farms practiced CSA in all regions of the country (McFadden, 2004).

At the heart of all CSA operations is the relationship between a farmer and members of the local community who purchase shares of the coming year's harvest. By making a pre-season payment, CSA members, or *shareholders*, assume part of the risk inherent in farming, such as the potential for weather, pests, or other natural occurrences to destroy a crop. Pre-season payments also provide cash flow for farmers to purchase seed and other inputs for the coming growing season. In return, farmers serve their shareholders by providing products that meet agreed upon expectations for quality, quantity, and production practices.

Despite this common thread of relationship with their shareholders, today's CSA farms are highly diverse. CSA farms vary in what they ask members to contribute to the farm, the role of CSA in an overall marketing plan, how they define a share, what they produce, and the production practices they use.

**The traditional model.** Traditionally, CSA farms raised a diversity of vegetables, fruits, herbs, and cut flowers and divided

the weekly harvest among its members as shares. In return, shareholders provided more than pre-season capital. They were also often involved in decision-making as well as on-farm work. CSA pioneers, such as Robyn Van En and Elizabeth Henderson, call this the *community farm model* because community members were involved in the life of the farm (Henderson and Van En, 1999). However, as journalist Steve McFadden recently noted, "CSA [has] diversified into a range of legal and social forms, with philosophically oriented CSAs on one end and commercially oriented subscription farms at the other" (McFadden, 2004). Some aspects of community farms are no longer part of many CSA farms.

### What members contribute has changed.

On many early CSA farms, core groups of shareholders were actively involved in farm decision-making. Today less than 30 percent of CSA farms have such groups (Lass et al., 2003). Required on-farm work (such as planting, weeding, or harvesting crops) is also becoming less common on CSA farms. These changes in shareholder involvement may be related to the role of CSA in a farm's overall marketing plan.



Figure 1. In addition to traditional mixed-basket shares, CSA farms now offer members opportunities to choose items in their weekly share.

**A growing number of farms with some form of CSA also use other marketing channels.** In a recent survey of CSA farmers, only 37 percent reported dedicating more than 90 percent of their cropland to CSA (Lass et al., 2003). Instead of being the primary activity around which a farm is structured, as promoted by the original CSA philosophy, CSA has become a more business-oriented marketing strategy. On many farms, CSA is one of many channels used to market products. Additional outlets—such as farmers markets and wholesale distributors—provide ways to make additional profit on surplus items. Though this may lead to less community involvement in the farm, CSA-based marketing remains an effective means of engaging the public in agriculture and food production. In 1999, 82 percent of CSA farms surveyed offered on-farm events such as potluck dinners, farm tours, and educational programs (Lass et al., 2003).

**The definition of a typical share has changed.** Though many farms continue to distribute the traditional mixed box, a number of CSA enterprises use alternative structures to give consumers greater choices in what they receive or to save farmers time and money. For example, some CSA farmers allow consumers to select the items and quantities they would like each week, with a cap on the market value of each order. Others use a debit account model with balance sheets to track the market value of items shareholders select at a weekly CSA market stand until they have “spent” their membership fee. Still others have adopted a subscription model through which shareholders receive a pre-determined quantity of an item or items on a weekly, monthly, or seasonal basis. CSA farms may even use a combination of share types, depending on their shareholders’ interests. These changes in share definition are related to the changing products offered by CSA farms.

**CSA has expanded beyond farms that primarily raise produce.** As on-farm diver-

sity increases, farmers may offer members products such as eggs, honey, and value-added products through their CSA. Live-stock farms, dairies, and other specialty producers have also created CSA-based marketing programs to sell their products to local consumers. For many of these products, once-a-week delivery isn’t necessary or feasible, leading to the creation of new CSA structures for non-produce items. Throughout the United States, there are also several examples of multi-farm CSA (also referred to as *farmer cooperative* or *collaborative CSA*) in which several farmers contribute items to a weekly share, offering consumers a greater variety in the items they can choose to purchase through a single CSA.

**One aspect of CSA has not changed:** its use by farmers who employ environmentally responsible production practices. Ninety-four percent of CSA farmers surveyed in 1999 reported that they used organic or biodynamic practices on their farms (Lass et al., 2003). These practices create a more sustainable agriculture, and consumers can use their influential food dollars to promote a cleaner and healthier environment. This trend does not imply, however, that every CSA farm is or needs to be certified organic. Honest communication between farmers and their CSA members is critical. As consumers become aware of the environmental impacts of agriculture, their buying choices are often influenced by what they know about *how* their food is produced. Using and advertising environmentally friendly practices can help CSA farms attract new members, just as fulfilling the obligation to raise food following those practices is an important part of retaining members.

Since its introduction to the United States 20 years ago, the concept of CSA has undergone considerable change and taken on a variety of forms. Today, CSA-based marketing is a viable alternative for many producers and flexible enough to allow farmers to create a CSA program that fits their operation, experience, and values.

## The Universal Challenge: Recruiting and Retaining Members

One critical step in establishing a new CSA is recruiting shareholders. This task remains a priority for most established CSA enterprises as well. Member retention rates reported for CSA enterprises range from 50 to 90 percent per year. For example, in a post-season survey of members of seven CSA farms in the southeastern United States, 63 percent said they planned to re-join the following spring (Kane and Lohr, 1996). In the book *Sharing the Harvest*, two farmers said they counted on losing 10 to 15 percent of their members from one year to the next (Henderson and Van En, 1999). Any farmer who adopts CSA as a marketing strategy must be prepared to continually recruit new members to remain viable.

**CSA farms use a variety of tools to recruit members.** Farmers hold events on their farms, send out brochures and flyers, run advertisements in local media, and conduct membership drives (Strochlic and Shelley, 2004). For many CSA farms, existing customers from farmers markets and other direct sales often form their initial membership.

**The most effective recruiting tool is word-of-mouth promotion,** according to both farmers and CSA shareholders. It does not require a great deal of financial investment and often attracts new members who are dedicated to the philosophy of CSA. On the other hand, word-of-mouth recruitment can lead to homogeneity in membership and limit access to CSA. It is often unreliable (particularly for smaller farmers), and may require several seasons to build membership to an acceptable level (Strochlic and Shelley, 2004). New ways of reaching potential members could help CSA farms build and maintain membership levels, whether CSA is their only marketing channel or one of several.

## Marketing to Groups

As today's CSA enterprises take diverse forms, many of which are more business and customer service oriented, CSA membership will become appealing to a greater portion of the general public. In other words, instead of drawing membership from the small population that values the original CSA philosophy, farmers now have the opportunity to sell CSA membership to nearly all food consumers. One way to reach this expanding audience is to promote CSA to members of existing groups, such as civic organizations, churches, and neighborhoods.

Many CSA farmers have successfully used the group approach to recruit and retain members. This approach can play an important role in cultivating greater participation in CSA because it offers several advantages.

**Most groups have communication mechanisms in place.** Communication is critical to member recruitment and retention as a way to:

- educate consumers about CSA,
- provide consumers the opportunity to join a CSA,
- build a strong relationship between farmer and members, and
- keep members connected to the life of the farm.

By working with groups, farmers can use group meetings, newsletters, Internet sites, and other communication tools to introduce CSA to new audiences and provide information to current members. These tools offer CSA farmers a lot of "free press" that may lead to new memberships and encourage membership renewal.

**Members of a group often influence one another.** This means that members of the group can encourage one another to participate in a CSA (especially if they have had

**WHY BUY LOCAL?**  
When you buy locally produced foods, you:

1. Buy fresher, more nutritious foods.
2. Reduce energy consumption.
3. Increase regional economic health.
4. Encourage a self-sufficient community.
5. Help preserve biodiversity.
6. Preserve the rural character of the land.
7. Avoid post-harvest contamination.
8. Support your local farmers!



a positive CSA experience). In addition, if a person in the group is hesitant about trying something new, they may be encouraged to do so if they have the support of other group members.

**Groups offer a convenient way to deliver weekly shares.** A major factor influencing the decision to join a CSA is the pick-up location and schedule for weekly shares. Consumers are more likely to join a CSA if their pick-up location does not require them to travel great distances or interrupt their weekly schedules. By coordinating with a group, a CSA can provide its members a convenient pick-up time and location, and deliver when the group is regu-

larly assembled at a location shared by the group or easily accessible to its members.

## Workplaces as CSA Groups

Workplaces—including businesses, corporations, and other employers—consist of employees who share a location and rely on an established infrastructure. Thus, workplaces might be good avenues for connecting local farmers to groups of potential customers and marketing CSA shares. The next section of this guide describes the RTI-CSA Program, a pilot project in North Carolina that is testing the concept of a *workplace CSA*.



## The RTI-CSA Program: A Pilot Project in Workplace CSA

Considering the potential benefits of building relationships between CSA farmers and existing groups, the Center for Environmental Farming Systems (CEFS, a partnership of North Carolina State University, North Carolina A&T University, and the North Carolina Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services) set out in 2002 to establish a pilot project to test the concept of workplace CSA: marketing CSA shares to the employees of a local company. With funding from the Golden LEAF Foundation and North Carolina Cooperative Extension, CEFS initiated a program with the Research Triangle Institute (RTI) that enabled local farmers to market CSA shares to RTI employees, using RTI infrastructure to promote the program among its employees and an RTI parking lot to serve as a share pick-up site. RTI is a nonprofit research institute with approximately 1,700 employees on its Research Triangle Park campus in North Carolina and 2,100 employees worldwide. The first season of the CSA program was 2003. By 2005, six farms were offering CSA shares to employees of RTI and other companies located in RTP, selling approximately 200 memberships.

### Project Initiation

CEFS initiated the RTI-CSA project in 2002 with two objectives: to build the capacity of local farmers to run a CSA and to open a market for new and existing CSA farmers at a large employer in the Triangle area (Raleigh, Durham, Chapel Hill). As a third party initiator of this project, CEFS recruited a company willing to participate, conducted farmer and market surveys, recruited farmers to participate in the workplace CSA program, provided training for farmers new to CSA, and carried out the work needed to

effectively utilize RTI as a CSA host. Funding from the Golden LEAF Foundation and North Carolina Cooperative Extension enabled CEFS to hire a project coordinator, produce materials promoting the RTI-CSA program, and offer training and consultation to farmer participants, all of which contributed to the success of the project.

**Host company recruitment.** Research Triangle Institute (RTI) was one of several companies invited by CEFS to host the workplace CSA pilot program. In 2002, project leaders sent targeted invitations to companies with 1,500 or more employees located in Research Triangle Park, a research campus near Raleigh and Durham that is home to more than 100 companies employing approximately 40,000 workers. The project target was to recruit at least 150 new CSA members (across all participating farms) and encourage 10 percent employee participation at the host company. When possible, invitations were addressed to personal contacts within each company. In the case of RTI, project leaders personally con-

Figure 2. North Carolina State University hosted a Web site to promote the RTI-CSA program for the first two years of the project.

First Come, First Serve

**Other RTP company employees can sign up too!**

First Come, First Serve

What if you could have fresh, organic & local produce, herbs, all-natural meats & eggs, homemade baked goods, cut flowers and other farm products delivered to your workplace?

**You can at RTI!**

Farmers & RTI'ers enjoy delivery day (Hanes Parking Lot) RTI Main Campus

tacted a company vice-president who had previously attended a workshop at CEFS and was aware of the social, economic, and environmental issues the CSA project aimed to address. Project coordinator Theresa Nartea believes that working through this type of established relationship with a company vice president was advantageous. Administrators at this level are in the position to introduce new company programs. In addition, working directly with someone within the company who had an understanding of the value of local food systems facilitated discussions about the project and fostered a willingness to participate in a pilot program despite potential challenges.

After learning about the program, RTI appointed its employee communications supervisor to serve as an on-site volunteer project leader. This volunteer worked

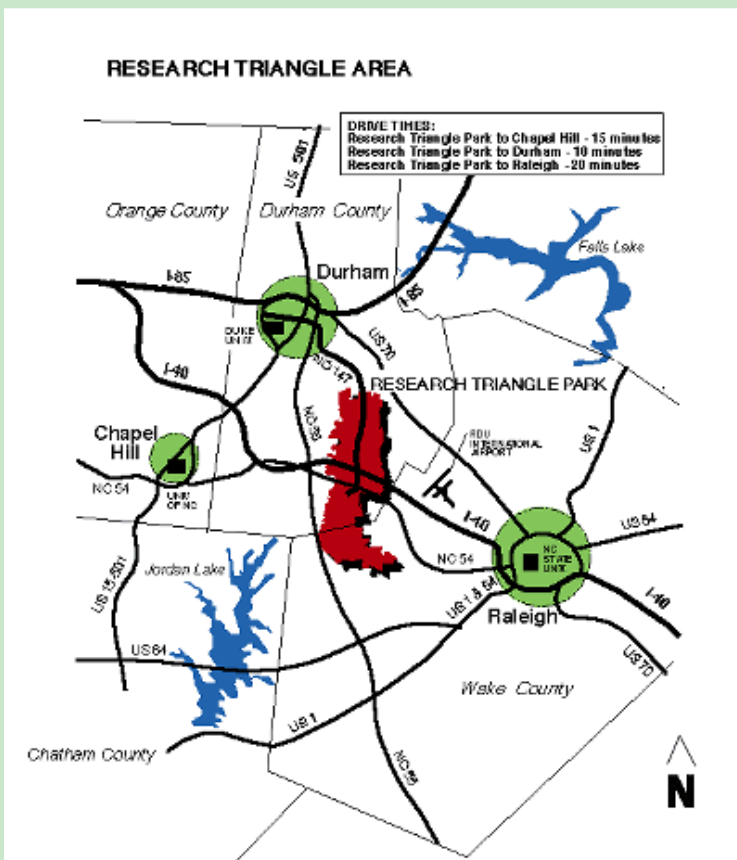
closely with the CEFS project coordinator on program details, such as providing a pick-up location on the RTI campus and carrying out promotional activities. Her expertise in communications served the program very well. The initial advertising and recruiting efforts depended on good communication materials and strategies. She also helped to form a volunteer CSA Employee Outreach Committee at RTI to assist with CSA activities.

**Farmer recruitment.** An on-line survey hosted by the Growing Small Farms Web site (a site managed by the Chatham County Cooperative Extension Center, <http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/chatham/ag/SustAg/index.html>) was used to make initial contact with farmers within 60 miles of Research Triangle Park. The program was marketed to farmers as an opportunity to expand their direct marketing options and learn how to run a CSA. Farmers were required to have some direct marketing experience (though not necessarily CSA) and a willingness to operate a CSA. Area extension agents, many of whom participated in an informational meeting held to describe the project, also played a critical role in notifying farmers about this opportunity. Sixteen farms applied to participate in the 2003 pilot season, four of which had an existing CSA program.

**Share options.** Participating farms offered a broad range of products through CSA, including vegetables, fruit, cheese, eggs, meats, firewood, jams, honey, and baked goods. RTI employees would be given the opportunity to purchase shares from the farms of their choice to receive the specific goods they wanted through CSA buying. For example, a customer could purchase one share from a vegetable grower, another share from a meat producer, and a third share for eggs.

The planning team discussed several share options for this multi-farm program. For example, one alternative could have

Figure 3. The RTI-CSA program is located in Research Triangle Park (RTP). All participating farms are within 60 miles of RTP.




been to assist farmers in pooling their products in order to sell more comprehensive packages instead of individual farmers selling shares. The project, however, opted to have each farmer manage his/her own CSA, which would foster relationships between the individual farmers and their shareholders. In addition, this structure allowed each farmer in the program to be independent and fully responsible for his/her own memberships, quality control, and other points that could become potential issues among participating farmers. The farmers did work together to promote the CSA concept and market CSA shares to RTI employees. In addition, several farmers teamed up to share delivery responsibilities and took turns delivering one another's shares to the weekly pick-up.

**Farmer training.** Farmers in the program who did not have an existing CSA participated in training sessions on CSA design, management, and promotion. The CEFS project coordinator, Theresa Nartea, also provided individual consultation to ensure that all farmers in the program had a CSA marketing plan, promotional materials, and a membership application before the first season of the program, which began in April 2003. (See Appendix 1 for examples of farm promotional materials and membership applications.) The CSA training aspect of this project and the development of a workplace CSA program were considered as separate project components. All farmers involved in a workplace program, however, should have the knowledge, skills, and, optimally, the experience needed to operate a successful CSA. Resources that provide information on designing and running a successful CSA can be found at the end of this guide.


## Lessons Learned: Beginning Strategies

The involvement of a third-party initiator, CEFS in this instance, represents one way to establish a workplace CSA. Such a program could also be led by a Cooperative Extension Center or a nonprofit organization. In addition, farmers and employers could also work with one another directly to develop a workplace CSA. Some of the funds for the RTI-CSA program were dedicated to building the farmers' ability to effectively run a CSA. This training is not, however, required to begin a workplace CSA. The costliest parts of starting a workplace CSA are promotion and organization. Promotional costs can be minimized by using cost-effective strategies, such as on-site meet-and-greet days, Web-based advertising, and the host company's internal communication channels. Farmers may also choose to budget for printed materials as individuals or a group, or the host company may be able to provide funds for such materials. Farmers and companies who do wish to initiate a workplace CSA though a direct relationship should understand that the project will be labor intensive and require time from both the farmer(s) and the company representative(s).



Brinkley Farms has been a family operation since 1941. Our farm is located in Northside, NC which is a small community between Raleigh and Durham. We proudly grow all our own produce and market directly to our customers. We have been able to survive in farming because we value our customers and their opinions, and we try to keep learning and doing new things to serve our customers. *We hope to be able to serve you in 2004!*

Name: William & Diane Brinkley  
 Farm Name: Brinkley Farms  
 Email: [BrinkleysVeggies@aol.com](mailto:BrinkleysVeggies@aol.com)  
 Phone: 919-528-0513  
 Address: 10225 Boyce Road, Creedmoor, NC 27522



**Kristin Brinkley proudly delivering a weekly share box to RTI employee!**

**We are offering two 2004 seasonal sessions:**

Spring/Summer (10 weeks) and Summer/Fall (12 weeks). In addition, we are making three different share sizes available to accommodate your family. The table below is an example of the different seasonal sessions and share combinations you can choose from. We definitely have more variety available, but this is just a typical idea of how we are working out our share offerings to you. *Our family will need to have a minimum of 14 family shares, OR 20 couple shares, OR 40 individual shares to make deliveries to RTI. Thanks for your support!*

Spring/Summer-Typical share sizes and value		Summer/Fall-Typical share sizes and value	
<b>Individual Share</b>		<b>Individual Share</b>	
1 head cabbage	\$1.00	1 lb. shelled butterbeans	\$4.00
1 lb. Kale	\$1.00	1 cantaloupe	\$1.50
1 bunch radishes	\$1.00	2 slicing cucumbers	\$1.00
2 lbs potatoes	\$2.00	1 lb. snap beans	\$1.50
<b>Total:</b>	<b>\$5.00</b>	<b>Total:</b>	<b>\$8.00</b>
<b>Couple Share</b>		<b>Couple Share</b>	
1 head Romaine lettuce	\$1.50	1 lb okra	\$2.50
1 lb. shelled English Peas	\$4.00	1 Sugar Baby Watermelon	\$3.00
2 lbs. potatoes	\$2.00	1 lb. shelled Purple Hull Peas	\$4.00
1 bunch broccoli	\$1.50	1 lb. tomatoes	\$1.50
1 Green pepper	\$1.00	1 lb. yellow squash	\$1.00
<b>Total:</b>	<b>\$10.00</b>	<b>Total:</b>	<b>\$12.00</b>
<b>Family Share</b>		<b>Family Share</b>	
1 pointed head cabbage	\$1.00	1 doz. Corn	\$4.00
1 head lettuce	\$1.00	1 lb. shelled butterbeans	\$4.00
1 bunch broccoli	\$1.50	1 watermelon	\$5.00
1 lb. shelled English Peas	\$4.00	2 lbs Roma beans	\$3.00
3-1/2 lbs. potatoes	\$3.50	1 lb. yellow squash	\$1.00
2 lbs. Spinach	\$4.00	1 lb. zucchini	\$1.00
<b>Total:</b>	<b>\$15.00</b>	4 slicing cucumbers	\$2.00
		<b>Total:</b>	<b>\$20.00</b>

Figure 4. Sample promotional piece developed by a new CSA farm for the RTI-CSA program. Additional samples of advertising materials used in the program can be found in Appendix 1.



## Year 1—2003

### SAMPLE QUESTIONS FROM THE RTI CONSUMER INTEREST SURVEY

1. How likely would you be to participate in a Community Supported Agriculture demonstration at your workplace?
2. What are your most important considerations when deciding to support local farms by purchasing at your workplace?
3. What locally produced food related items would you be interested in having delivered weekly to your workplace?
4. Would you consider this service to be an employee benefit?

**Market survey.** The first activity undertaken at RTI was a survey of employees to determine their interest in participating in the CSA program. In March 2003, all RTI employees received an e-mail with a link to an on-line survey hosted by NC State University (Appendix 2). Approximately 14 percent of the employees (235) responded to the survey. All respondents indicated that they were somewhat likely (36 percent) or very likely (64 percent) to participate in a CSA pilot program at RTI. In addition, 92 percent of respondents considered the CSA an employee benefit. The survey also included questions regarding use of organic products, considerations when deciding to join a workplace CSA, and products that respondents would like to purchase through CSA.

**Employee recruitment and participation.** The 2003 growing season was the pilot year of the RTI-CSA program. Based on the results of the market survey, organizers hoped to recruit 10 percent of RTI's 1,700 employees to participate in the program. The project used face-to-face interaction between farmers and employees as the primary way to recruit employee CSA shareholders. In April 2003, the 16 farms participated in two CSA membership sign-up days held on the RTI campus, one in the

main campus cafeteria and one in an office building. At the sign-up events, each farm had a display table to advertise products and CSA memberships to RTI employees, and a representative from each farm was available to answer questions regarding the CSA concept.

Prior to the sign-up days, employees received information about the new RTI-CSA program through two RTI internal communication channels: the company's e-mail network for employees and printed materials posted throughout the RTI campus. These e-mails and printed materials provided information about CSA in general, explained some details about the RTI-CSA program (such as share pick-up time and location and products available), and announced the sign-up days. Appendix 3 presents examples of informational materials distributed to RTI employees.

The RTI-CSA Employee Outreach Committee of volunteers from RTI provided leadership for these advertising activities. In addition, the project coordinator developed a Web site about the program that was hosted by North Carolina State University. Through the sign-up days and other promotional activities, 118 CSA shares were sold to RTI employees in the first year of the project and hundreds of additional employees learned about the program.

**Farm participation.** Of the 16 farms that participated in the RTI sign-up days, 11 had shareholders at RTI in 2003. Several of these 11 farms did not have enough sign-ups at RTI to warrant the cost of delivery to the campus pick-up site and withdrew from the program prior to the season. Many of the farms that withdrew had limited product availability (for example, a single product such as eggs). Farms with a wide variety of products generally sold more shares in Year 1. Farms that withdrew from the program offered RTI shareholders the opportunity to select an alternative pick-up site for their share (if available) or a refund of their membership fee.

Figure 5. Sign-up days on the RTI campus each spring give employees the opportunity to meet farmers, learn more about CSA, and purchase CSA shares.





## Lessons Learned: Program Design

**Consider the number of farms involved initially.** This experience highlights an important point regarding the initial design of a workplace CSA program—the workplace market is competitive, so plan accordingly. The goal of 10 percent employee participation was not reached in the pilot year of the RTI-CSA. Organizers concluded that this was because the CSA concept was new to most employees, and many were not ready to commit to buying a share without learning more about CSA. The high ratio of farms to shares meant that 16 farms were vying for approximately 120 shares, an average of less than 8 shares per participating farm. For most farms, this level of customer participation did not warrant travel to the RTI pick-up site. This problem may be avoided by limiting the number of farms that are part of a new CSA program at a workplace or another limited market (such as a civic organization or church congregation). By doing so, each farm in the program will have a greater likelihood of recruiting the number of members it needs to make participation economically feasible. In addition, a successful core group of farmers will create a satisfied base of customers, which in turn will serve as a strong recruiting tool to draw new members. As consumer interest grows, more farms can join the program to meet demand.

**What is a good starting number of participating farms?** Based on the level of participation experienced in year one of the RTI-CSA program and discussions with farmers, the following formula may help to identify a good starting point:

$(\text{Number of potential participants} \times .05)/25 = \text{Number of farms}$

This formula is based on an anticipated employee participation rate of 5 percent during the first year. The target number of shares per participating farm is 25. Therefore, for a workplace with 1,500 employees, use the following formula to estimate a starting number of farms:

$$(1,500 \times .05)/25 = 3 \text{ farms}$$

Again, this formula gives only an estimate of a reasonable starting point; it is not a hard and fast rule. The outcome for both farmers and consumer will be influenced by many factors, including these:

- actual level of employee participation,
- employees' initial knowledge about the CSA concept,
- types of products offered by CSA farms,
- target number of shares each farmer desires, and
- quality of the participating CSA farms.

Participation each year should serve as a guide to planning for the following year.

**Conduct a consumer interest survey.** Another way to determine the appropriate number of farms to involve in a workplace CSA is a consumer interest survey at the host company, as was conducted at RTI. Such a survey can give project leaders information on the potential number of employee participants, the familiarity of consumers with the concept of CSA, and factors consumers would use to determine whether they would join a CSA. The results can be used to determine the number of farms to include in the program initially, guide promotional activities, and offer farmers ideas on how to structure their CSA to meet the interests of employees.

**Program logistics.** As previously described, each CSA farm managed their respective shares independently with regard to share contents, financial accounting, and communication with members. The majority of farms, however, did use the shared pick-up location and time. RTI provided a parking lot for farms to bring member shares each Thursday afternoon from 4 PM to 6 PM. Farmers were also permitted to set up small stands to sell additional items to members and other employees. Delivery began in May and continued through September.

Members of the RTI-CSA Employee Outreach Committee helped coordinate logistics for use of the parking lot, including posting signs each Thursday and notifying security of the weekly market. The committee also acted as a liaison between employee CSA members and participating farms to communicate consumer concerns to farmers and answer questions about the overall program or a specific issue. The committee also assisted with all aspects of program promotion.

Figure 6. Each Thursday from April to October, participating farms bring CSA shares to their RTI members. The drop-site is a parking lot located on the RTI campus. Farms often set up a small stand to sell "extra" items to shareholders and other employees.



## Lessons Learned: Volunteer Committee

The development of an internal, volunteer committee is important to long-term success. During the first year, some very committed company consumers at RTI decided they needed to help make the program successful. Through their initiative and commitment, the program will now thrive on its own and does not need outside facilitation. The importance of an internal committed group of volunteers cannot be overstressed.

In August 2003, the RTI-CSA Employee Outreach Committee sponsored a farmer appreciation day during a Thursday pick-up session. The purpose of the event was to recognize the CSA farms in the program and give RTI employees who did not participate in the program an additional opportunity to learn how CSA works. RTI provided farmers with funds that enabled them to bring sample items for CSA customers and other RTI employees. Employees who were not CSA members had the opportunity to join a CSA listserv (an e-mail-based communication tool) if they wanted to receive more specific information about the RTI-CSA and notification of upcoming sign-up days and other events. As with other project activities, this event was advertised through RTI's internal communication channels. Farmer Appreciation Day has become an annual event for the RTI-CSA program.

At the end of the 2003 pilot season, RTI and several of the participating farms agreed to continue the program in 2004, with the continued assistance of the CEFS project coordinator.

**Consumer feedback.** In December 2003, CEFS and RTI conducted a follow-up survey of employees about the RTI-CSA program (Appendix 4). All RTI employees received

the survey, regardless of whether they had participated in the CSA program in 2003. The survey results provided suggestions for future program improvements and indicated the effectiveness of promotion activities.

The survey findings indicated that participating employees were generally satisfied with the CSA program. Both participants and non-participants made several suggestions to encourage greater participation in the program and to help tailor the CSA concept to meet consumer needs and expectations. Consumer suggestions also offered insight into various aspects of the program:

*“Offer more consumer choice in share contents and alternative payment plans.”* This suggestion implied that RTI employees were more likely to join a CSA for practical reasons (such as convenience or food quality) than philosophical (a desire to share risks and take part in the life of the farm). The structure of a CSA marketed to this base of consumers should consider this perspective. The suggestions made by RTI employees were shared with farms in the program to help them tailor their RTI-CSA shares to meet the needs of RTI consumers (see the farm profiles on pages 13, 15, and 17 for more information on individual farms in the RTI-CSA).

*“Improve communication about the program.”* The need for improved communication was evidenced by the fact that many farms already offered some of the services that employees suggested. For example, employees suggested that farmers bring additional items for purchase by walk-up customers; farmers were already doing so, but employees were unaware of this service. Survey respondents and the CSA Employee Outreach Committee cited several ways to improve communication about the program. An important tool for advertising the program was the internal e-mail communication system, which most survey respondents considered an effective means of promoting the CSA. Employees also suggested increasing the use of printed materials,

such as fliers and direct mailings, as well as developing strategies for person-to-person contacts, such as lunchtime seminars, other informational sessions, and a designated CSA contact in each department.

*“Provide more sign-up days in the spring.”*

## Year 2—2004

**Farm participation.** At the end of the 2003 season, five farms expressed an interest in continuing the program in 2004. Those who remained with the program represented a good level of diversity for collectively marketing CSA memberships with limited competition between individual farms. The remaining farms offered several options to consumers with regard to price, products, CSA structure, and growing practices (certified organic). One additional farm was invited to join the program to offer greater diversity to RTI-CSA customers.

**Employee recruitment and participation.** Strategies to advertise the program to RTI employees in 2004 were based on the results of the 2003 end-of-season survey. Most significantly, the RTI-CSA Committee and participating farmers organized eight sign-up days in the spring of 2004 (as opposed to two in 2003). As in 2003, sign-up days were held at several different locations on the RTI campus. By increasing the number of opportunities to meet farmers and learn about CSA, the organizers hoped that more employees would participate in sign-up days and purchase a CSA share. Based on the effectiveness of RTI’s e-mail news network, it was again used to advertise sign-up days and give general information about the program. The RTI-CSA Committee also maintained a listserv for the previous year’s CSA members and others who had signed up to join the listserv as an additional means of advertising sign-up days. The program Web site hosted by North Carolina State University was updated for the 2004 season. In addition, North Carolina

### CSA SUGGESTIONS FROM RTI CONSUMERS

- Offer smaller and more affordable shares appropriate for individuals and couples.
- Increase consumer choice in selecting share contents.
- Add a farmers’ market component to the CSA pick up day so that consumers can buy additions to their subscription from other farmers.
- Offer “trial shares” to allow customers to participate for a few weeks to determine whether or not they want to join a CSA for an entire season.
- Consider alternatives to upfront payment for the full season such as payment plans or options to purchase short-term shares.

## PARTICIPATING FARMS IN YEAR 2

- Brinkley Farms, Creedmoor: vegetables raised using integrated pest management
- The Growing Station, Wake Forest: flowers, herbs, mushrooms, and garlic grown using organic methods\*
- Hannah Creek Farm, Four Oaks: vegetables grown using organic methods
- Mystic Farm, Pittsboro: fruits and berries grown using organic methods
- NuHorizons Farm, Pittsboro: hormone- and antibiotic-free livestock products and value added products
- Timberwood Organics, Efland: certified organic vegetables

*\*new participant in year 2*

Cooperative Extension provided funds for a color brochure about the 2004 program and participating farms (Appendix 5).

Through word-of-mouth advertising, employees at other companies in RTP had learned about the RTI-CSA program and expressed an interest in participating in 2004. RTI management agreed to allow non-RTI employees to join the program, but limited the number of shares that could be sold to non-RTI employees to 100. Promotion of the program at other companies was through informal channels because RTI's management did not wish to use their employees' time to plan sign-up days and events for other companies. For example, an RTI employee would pass information regarding sign-up days to a single employee at another company.

In 2004, six farms sold 190 shares to RTI employees and employees of several neighboring companies. Between 5 and 10 percent of the shares were sold to non-RTI employees. Organizers estimate that 170 to 180 shares were sold to RTI employees. Though some individuals purchased shares from multiple farms, estimated RTI employee participation was nearly 10 percent in Year 2 of the project.

**Consumer feedback.** Following the 2004 season, project organizers (including farmers, RTI representatives, and the project coordinator) decided not to conduct an annual end-of-season survey of RTI employees as in 2003. Results of the 2003 survey provided sufficient information to assist farmers in making any needed improvements in their CSA structure and identify effective promotion strategies. Most farms had also adopted their own end-of-season surveys of members to assess their CSA programs.

**RTI-farmer partnership.** To ensure the long-term existence and success of the RTI-CSA program, RTI and the participating farmers had to build a good working relationship. In the pilot year of the program, the groups worked independently,

with the CEFS project coordinator serving as the primary channel through which the RTI-CSA Employee Outreach Committee and farmers communicated with one another. Efforts were made during Year 2 to facilitate direct communication between the two groups and begin to lessen the role of the grant-funded project coordinator in anticipation of the future when no grant funding would be available. For example, RTI representatives, farmers, and the project coordinator met in November 2004 for a 2004 wrap-up and 2005 planning meeting. At this meeting, the group evaluated the outcomes of the 2004 season, discussed issues that arose during the season (such as RTI's policies on non-employee shareholders), and made promotional plans for 2005. Tasks for the 2005 season were distributed to the RTI-CSA Committee, the farmers, and the project coordinator. Farmers also asked to be included in any meetings held by the RTI-CSA Committee and to receive minutes of meetings they could not attend.

## Year 3—2005

### **Employee recruitment and participation.**

The RTI-CSA Employee Outreach Committee and participating farmers determined that eight sign-up days were too labor intensive and did not serve to increase employee participation in 2004. The farmers also expressed an interest in holding sign-up days in February and March as opposed to March and April to enable them to better plan for the season. In 2005, the group held only three sign-up days on the RTI campus in February, primarily aimed at recruiting new customers. Most farmers reported that by 2005, they had established a good base of members at RTI. Farmers communicated directly with the previous year's members in December, so many returning members did not use the on-campus sign-up days to purchase their 2005 share(s). Sign-up days were announced through RTI's employee e-mail network, targeted



## Brinkley Farms—Creedmoor: William and Diane Brinkley

Brinkley Farms is located approximately 25 miles from the RTI campus. William and Diane Brinkley run the farm with the help of their son, Michael, and daughters Ty and Christine. The 60-acre farm began as a tobacco farm and has expanded over the years to include fresh vegetables, pumpkins, horse hay, soybeans, grains, and pasture-raised pork. The Brinkleys use a variety of direct marketing channels to sell their farm products, including an on-site farm stand, farmers markets, and the RTI-based CSA. Their CSA experience began in 2003 with the RTI-CSA program. The Brinkleys have seen a steady increase in the number of shares they sell at RTI and have added CSA shareholders outside of the RTI community.

The Brinkley Farm CSA offers shareholders a variety of fresh produce grown using sustainable methods of integrated pest management. The CSA has several features designed to meet the needs of RTI shareholders. For example, Brinkley Farm CSA shares can be purchased for an early season from late April to late June, a late season that runs from late June through mid-September, or both. Both seasons function as individual shares and can be purchased independently of each other. The early season share is priced lower than the late season share. Diane Brinkley says that the split-season shares allow more flexibility for members who travel during the summer, although many members end up buying shares for both the early and late seasons. In 2005, the Brinkleys had approximately 40 shares for each season.

In designing their CSA, the Brinkleys also wanted to insure that their shareholders could choose the produce they would

receive in a given week. Instead of giving shareholders a traditional box, the Brinkleys allow shareholders to choose the types and quantity of produce they receive each week up to a specific monetary value (for example, \$8.00 a week). The weekly value is based on the share size purchased (individual, couple, or family). The range of share sizes available addresses another common concern for CSA shareholders—having too much food. Each week, the Brinkleys e-mail their shareholders a price list of the fruits and vegetables available for delivery. The Brinkleys then custom-pack each shareholder's box based on the e-mail order. In addition to sending the list of available items, the Brinkleys offer their members a weekly farm report and a "recipe of the week." Both their shareholders and the Brinkleys enjoy the relationship fostered by the CSA program.

Overall, the Brinkleys are happy with their decision to add the CSA to their farm operation. For them, the RTI-CSA offers the convenience of delivering a large amount of shares to one location and has helped them to build a committed customer base. They also see the benefit of the CSA promotion offered by RTI. Developing the CSA has not been without its challenges, as it has required changes (including increases) in farm planning and learning the products and quantities needed to meet CSA shareholder demand. Even with the success of their CSA, the Brinkleys plan to continue using farmers markets and other direct marketing strategies. They appreciate the flexibility offered by multiple outlets and enjoy the opportunity to continually meet and serve new customers.

### FARM PROFILE 1. Brinkley Farms



e-mails, and printed posters.

The RTI-CSA Web site also played an important role in recruiting shareholders for 2005. In fall 2004, RTI officially launched an RTI-CSA Web site hosted by RTI and maintained by the RTI-CSA Employee Outreach Committee. One version of the Web site is available on RTI's external site: [www.rti.org/csa](http://www.rti.org/csa), with another version available on the company's internal Web site. The Web site contains an overview of the RTI-CSA program, general information on CSA, directions to the pick-up site, descriptions of each farm in the program, and links to membership information for each farm (a CSA description and membership application developed by the farm). In addition to using the Web site to invite employees to the RTI sign-up days, many farmers reported that RTI employees (as well as employees from other RTP companies) used the site to obtain membership forms for the 2005 season. No information is available on whether those using the Web site for this purpose were returning or new members.

The internal Web site was a valuable communication tool throughout the 2005 season. The RTI-CSA Committee updated the site weekly and listed "extra" items that farms would bring to each Thursday's pick-up for walk-up sales, based on weekly communication with each farmer. The Web site enhanced communication between the

farms and CSA members and underscored RTI's commitment to making the program a success.

Approximately 200 shares were purchased for the 2005 season.

**Farm participation.** The RTI-CSA Committee and participating farmers concluded that the demand for CSA shares anticipated for 2005 could be met by the six farms that participated during the 2004 season. No additional farms were invited to join the program for 2005, and all six farms returned for the season. Interviews with five of six participating farmers during the 2005 season indicated that most were satisfied with the program. Of these farmers, four were new to CSA when they began the program. All now consider CSA an important component of their overall marketing plan. Three of the five farmers interviewed were satisfied with the number of shareholders they had at RTI in 2005. Most reported having established the minimum number of shareholders they would need to continue to participate in the RTI program and the maximum number they could manage reasonably. One farmer, in fact, reported that she had sold the maximum number of RTI shares she could manage for the 2005 season. All six farmers have shareholders outside of the RTI program, and none have expressed an interest in having 100 percent of their CSA membership at RTI.

With regard to the perceived benefits of their participation in RTI-CSA, farmers surveyed felt that RTI helped them promote their CSA and effectively recruit and retain members. The RTI program has also opened new marketing opportunities to the farms, such as an invitation to participate in an Earth Day celebration at a company near RTI. As detailed in the farm profiles (pages 13 - 17), most farmers found that changes to their original CSA structure were necessary to meet the needs and interests of members from RTI and other workplaces.

After the 2004 season, the six farms in the program had discussed the possibility

Figure 7. RTI-CSA employee shareholders enjoy a broad range of products delivered weekly to the RTI campus.



## Nu Horizons Farm—Pittsboro: Susan and Leigh Lorraine

Nu Horizons Farm is located approximately 35 miles from the RTI campus. Prior to their involvement in the RTI-CSA program, the Lorraines did not have experience operating a CSA and were encouraged to add the CSA to their operation through the program. In addition to the RTI-CSA and farmer's markets, Nu Horizons offers their products through their Web site and their own country market.

Nu Horizons products include pasture-raised beef, pork, lamb, and chicken that is free of antibiotics, hormones, steroids and animal byproducts. They also offer fresh brown eggs from free-ranging chickens; homemade breads, pies, cookies, cinnamon rolls and pound cake; fresh pasta and pasta sauces; jams, jellies and assorted "canned" (jar) goods; and seasonal produce.

With a product base of items suited to storage and considerable business experience, the Lorraines developed their own unique Web-based CSA structure. CSA memberships are available year-round, with the year separated into two "seasons" of 26 weeks each. A "season" begins on the first week of the month following a customer's payment. Shareholders may purchase a full share or a half share, which entitles them to purchase \$30 or \$15 worth of products for 18 of the 26 weeks in any season.

By logging into their own online accounts, shareholders place their weekly orders, which are then custom-packed and delivered to each shareholder's selected pick up location. Leigh says that they determined the appropriate share

sizes by analyzing RTI employee demographics to predict the quantity of food that would be consumed in a household in half a year and the value of those items on a weekly basis. Shareholders are able to purchase more items at additional cost.

The Lorraines value the addition of the CSA to their farming operation. Since first offering CSA shares at RTI in 2003, they have expanded their CSA membership beyond the RTI-CSA program. They now offer pickups for their shareholders at their own farm and at the farmers markets they attend, in addition to the RTI drop point. In fact, Leigh Lorraine says he would like to convert as many of his regular market and Web customers as possible to CSA shareholders.

In hindsight, he says, using the CSA model may have been a better way for them to get their business off the ground, as opposed to working to build a customer base through markets and online sales. The CSA offers Nu Horizons a guaranteed market for their products, enables them to better know their customers and the products their customers want to buy, and allows them to test-market new and less common products before investing in a new area of production.

### FARM PROFILE 2. Nu Horizons Farm



of becoming a more formal organization (the Triangle Farmers' CSA) to retain their position as the farms with which RTI would work. The organization would make decisions regarding whether or not additional farms were needed to meet consumer demand at RTI and develop an application process through which other farms could join the program. The group also discussed approaching other companies to host workplace CSA programs, allowing group members to share the work of contacting businesses and handling the logistics of replicating the RTI program with another company. Were other workplace CSA programs to begin, the Triangle Farmers CSA would serve as the entity with which companies could work, as opposed to having to initiate relationships with individual farmers. The organization would then also decide which of their farmer members would work with each company that wanted a CSA program and recruit farms to join the organization as needed. As of May 2006, no further action had been taken to formalize the work of the Triangle Farmers' CSA or market the workplace CSA concept to other companies in RTI.

**RTI-farmer partnership.** In June 2005, one of two project co-directors for RTI commented that in its third season, the RTI-CSA program more or less ran itself. The RTI-CSA Committee maintained regular communication with participating farmers to assure that all promotional plans were carried out prior to the beginning of the season, including gathering farm information for the RTI-hosted Web site and coordinating on-campus sign-up days. Use of the RTI parking lot as a pick up location has also continued.

## 2006

In 2006, RTI employees again had the opportunity to purchase CSA shares from six local farms. The RTI-CSA Committee and

participating farmers took full responsibility for the program, recruiting a new farm (one farm left the program in 2005), carrying out spring sign-up days, and promoting the program among RTI employees. Information was not yet available on employee participation for 2006 when this guide was written.

RTI's approach to hosting a multi-farm CSA program provides a model that other employers can use to develop similar partnerships with local farmers. The next section of this guide describes the benefits of hosting a workplace CSA, the basic functions a company must carry out to serve as a host, and suggestions for other activities a company may take on to ensure that the CSA program is a success. Companies or organizations with an interest in hosting a CSA should also contact their local agricultural extension office for additional information and assistance.



## Timberwood Organics—Efland: Ray and Maria Christopher

The Christophers grow certified organic produce on their farm, which is within 30 miles of RTI. Timberwood has had organic certification since 1992 and began a CSA in 2000. Non-RTI-CSA members enjoy a variety of fresh, organic produce delivered to their homes from April through October. Like other farms in the RTI-CSA program, the Christophers deliver weekly boxes to their RTI members on the RTI campus each Thursday. In addition to their traditional CSA and the RTI-CSA, Timberwood sells produce at several area farmers markets and to an organic wholesale distributor, Eastern Carolina Organics.

Timberwood Organics represents a blend of the traditional CSA model (members receive a weekly mixed box) with more business-oriented aspects (no work requirement for members and numerous customer-focused services). Though the Christophers rely on several marketing channels to maximize sales, the CSA is the priority when planning what to plant, how much, and when. Ray says they have learned many lessons about operating a CSA, for instance choosing produce varieties that are better suited to CSA customers. Offering certified organic produce and home delivery also makes Timberwood a unique CSA operation that is attractive to potential new members. Ray doesn't feel organic certification is critical to attracting new members, but it definitely enables the farm to receive higher prices on the wholesale market. Organic certification also demonstrates the Christophers' commitment to environmental stewardship.

The Christophers joined the RTI-CSA program with several years of CSA ex-

perience, though they quickly saw that their CSA structure would need some changes to meet the needs of the RTI population. For example, their traditional CSA offers only two share sizes: standard (for two to three people) and large (for four to six people). Based on the number of one-person households that wanted to join the CSA at RTI, the Christophers decided to offer a third share size, a small share for one person. Ray has also observed other differences between RTI and his traditional CSA members. Traditionally, CSA members have sought out the opportunity to be a shareholder in a farm, or were introduced to the concept by family or friends who valued not only fresh produce, but also the philosophy of CSA. Marketing CSA to a "captive audience" at a corporation means that more members join based on the business-oriented qualities of the CSA as opposed to the philosophy. This shift in motivation led Timberwood to make more changes to the structure of its RTI-CSA, namely decreasing the number of weeks of membership in order to lower the season price. This lessened the "sticker shock" and helped to attract more shareholders. This also helps the Christophers and their work crew ease into the CSA season each spring by decreasing the number of boxes that must be packed for the first several weeks.

Of course, Timberwood Organics isn't strictly business and works to build a relationship between its members and the life of the farm. In the true CSA spirit, the Christophers invite all CSA members to join in pick-your-own days throughout the season to learn how their food is grown and enjoy the fruits of their own farm labors.

### FARM PROFILE 3. Timberwood Organics



## Hosting a Workplace CSA

Figure 8. A CSA host provides an on-site location for CSA sign-up events in which employees meet participating farmers and have the opportunity to purchase shares for the coming season. The host also assists in advertising the sign-up event. At RTI, a volunteer committee of employees worked with farmers to plan and carry out spring sign-up days.



### Why Host a CSA?

**Being a CSA host provides a valuable service to farmers, employees, and the community.** For farmers, the opportunity to market their products directly to local consumers through a CSA can mean improved cash flow, higher income, and an overall stronger business. As a CSA host, a company can help a farmer connect with potential CSA shareholders more efficiently and build a customer base more quickly than traditional at-large CSA marketing.

**A CSA provides company employees fresh farm products and offers the convenience of having food brought to the workplace.** As the RTI consumer interest survey demonstrated, many employees consider having a company CSA program a benefit of employment. Therefore, hosting a CSA can give a company a competitive edge in attracting new employees.

**CSA helps build a secure regional food system and strong local economy.** To host a CSA is to make an investment in the wellbeing of the local community by promoting entrepreneurship, investment in small businesses, consumer health, and en-

vironmental conservation. As RTI stated in their 2004 annual report, the CSA program enabled them to “turn [their] ideals into action – right here in [their] own backyard” (RTI, 2005).

### What Does a CSA Host Do?

A workplace CSA is a mutually beneficial partnership between a company and a CSA farm or farms. As a partner, the host company provides several resources to help farmers promote their CSA programs and serve their company customers.

**Provide space for the weekly delivery of CSA shares to employee-members.** A parking lot or other outdoor location is generally appropriate for share pick-up. The logistics involved in providing this space will depend on the company. The company should take responsibility to see that all necessary steps (such as approval from management and notification of security services) are carried out so that farmers and customers have access to the space at a designated time. In addition, the company should inform farmers and customers of any policies regarding the use of the space. This work will likely involve the time of at least one employee.

**Provide resources to assist farmers in promoting the CSA program to their employees.** Most often this resource involves the use of internal communication networks, for example, e-mail services or company newsletters. In the RTI-CSA program, volunteers on the CSA Employee Outreach Committee distributed information materials through an existing e-mail news network. Another communication tool the company may offer farmers is the company Web site. RTI has several pages on its inter-

nal and external Web sites dedicated to the CSA program. This is an excellent service to farmers who do not have Web pages and clearly demonstrates that the program is a company-supported initiative, giving it greater credibility. Members of the RTI-CSA Committee provided text, maps and other relevant pieces for the Web pages to the company's Web site manager, who insured that the format was consistent with the overall site. Farmers also contributed CSA descriptions and membership application forms in portable document format (PDF) that linked to the Web site.

### Host sign-up days each winter or spring.

The sign-up days play an important role in educating employees about the CSA concept and giving farmers the opportunity to market CSA shares. The face-to-face interaction between farmers and employees was critical to the success of the RTI-CSA program and a worthwhile investment. The RTI-CSA Committee was responsible for identifying and reserving suitable locations at the company for the sign-up event; arranging for door prizes (often farm products); and advertising the date, time, and location of each sign-up event to employees. During an annual planning meeting, the RTI-CSA Committee and participating farmers determined the number and target dates of sign-up days that would occur the following spring.

## Building a Strong Partnership

Communication is the key to any successful partnership, including one between a company and its CSA farmers. Prior to the first CSA season, partners should meet to clarify policies and responsibilities as well as discuss their individual expectations for the program. Annual meetings should continue as a means of assessing the partnership and addressing any issues that may arise as the program develops.

## Example

An unforeseen issue in the RTI-CSA program was interest in joining the program from employees of companies other than RTI. For farmers, the opportunity to include outside employees seemed beneficial, as it would mean more customers. RTI, however, had two concerns:

- They did not want to invest their employees' time in promotional activities for other companies.
- They did not want to host a centralized CSA program for multiple businesses in the area.

From RTI's perspective, other companies that wanted to offer the benefit of a CSA program to their employees should host a program themselves.

To resolve the issue, RTI proposed a policy limiting non-RTI shareholders to 100 and restricting activities of the RTI-CSA Committee to the RTI audience. Farmers could, however, work to promote the program in other companies, and non-RTI employees would be welcomed at spring sign-up and share pick-up days. The RTI-CSA Committee discussed this policy with farmers, who agreed that the policy was reasonable and would not prohibit them from reaching their objectives.

By communicating its expectations to the farmers in responding to this issue, RTI demonstrated its commitment to the farmers' needs while protecting its own interests. Fostering a relationship between the company (as represented by a CSA volunteer committee) and the farmers is critical to assuring that a workplace CSA meets the needs and expectations of both partners.



Figure 9. A parking lot on the RTI campus provides a central location for CSA members to pick up their weekly share and purchase additional products as they are available.

## The Importance of an Employee Committee

A workplace CSA needs the continued support of the host company to carry out the necessary activities. At RTI, a volunteer CSA Employee Outreach Committee led these activities. It is recommended that all CSA host companies form a similar committee for several reasons:

- The committee sees that logistics are carried out and that the program meets company expectations.
- It helps to build a strong working relationship between the company and participating farmers. A good partnership creates shared ownership of the program, enables partners to work directly with one another to resolve issues in manner that meets both partners' interests, and contributes to the long-term success of the program.
- It demonstrates to other employees that the company supports the program and encourages participation.

### Example

In addition to carrying out basic responsibilities, volunteers on the RTI-CSA Committee also adopted additional activities to encourage fellow employees to participate in the program. Volunteers served as liaisons between customers and farmers, answering questions from employees as needed and voicing customer concerns to farmers. In addition, the committee initiated the annual Farmer Appreciation Day as a service to both the farmers and employees. Even with these additional activities, volunteers have not reported a need to spend a considerable amount of time carrying out tasks related to the CSA program and all enjoy the benefits of being CSA members.



## Farm Participation in Workplace CSA

Approaching existing groups, including local employers, can be an efficient and effective means of recruiting and retaining CSA members (Henderson and Van En, p. 35). A farmer should consider several factors before initiating or joining a workplace CSA program.

have enough shares available to meet consumer demand?

As discussed earlier, a market survey or simple mathematical operation can yield a reasonable estimate of the number of shares employees will purchase when a workplace CSA begins.

### Your Marketing Strategy

Does a workplace CSA fit your marketing strategy and capabilities? The most important consideration before approaching a business to initiate a workplace CSA (either as an individual farmer or group of farmers) is whether or not adding CSA shares from a workplace program fits the farm operation. Evaluate the potential number of shares available at the business or corporation:

- Does the number warrant adding a new drop-site to the farm's existing marketing strategy (especially if the business is a long distance from the farm)?
- Do all the farms that might participate

### Partnering with a Workplace

Are you willing to devote the time required to partner successfully with a workplace? Farms must maintain a good relationship not only with customers, but also with the business that hosts the CSA. Building an effective and long lasting partnership requires time, flexibility, and willingness to compromise. As discussed in the section on "Building a Strong Partnership" (p. 19), the efforts to foster a strong working relationship contribute to the long-term success of a workplace CSA program and help to ensure that it meets the needs of the sponsoring workplace, employee shareholders, and the farmers involved. This effort requires a

### Example

Many farmers in the RTI program set a minimum and maximum number of members they wanted to recruit through the program. The minimum represented the number of shares each farmer needed to make delivery to RTI shareholders profitable, considering the time, labor, and cost involved. The maximum represented the number of shares each farmer could reasonably prepare for delivery to RTI in light of other marketing activities.

The RTI-CSA program also provides evidence that workplace CSA members often have different interests and needs than members who actively seek out a CSA to join. If a farm does not have experience working with this type of audience, the farm profiles included in this report provide excellent examples of the types of shares a farmer may consider offering or changes that can be made to an existing CSA structure. Introducing changes to the share structure can alter the amount of time and labor needed to prepare members' weekly shares (negatively or positively), making it important to evaluate the impacts of such changes on overall operation.

commitment to attend meetings and collectively solve any problems that arise.

The type of program established at RTI is only one example of a workplace CSA. Less formal arrangements with a business, its employees, or both may also benefit a CSA operation. For example, a farmer or group of farmers may approach a business to help advertise their CSA without using the location as a drop-site. This type of arrangement can be called a *sponsorship*, with the *workplace sponsor* allowing farmers use of the workplace internal communication networks to reach employees and possibly providing an on-site location for employee sign-up. Asking a current CSA member to help initiate this type of program is the best way to approach a workplace sponsor. Even less formal than sponsorship is asking a current CSA member to simply share information about CSA with his or her co-workers.

## Working in Groups

Are you willing to consider the needs of other farmers within the group? Though not all workplace CSA programs involve multiple farms, the RTI-CSA program raised several points about working together as a group of farmers. It may be advantageous for initiating farmers, together with the host, to develop guidelines regarding key points, such as how and when new farms will be invited to join the program and how to balance product availability during the first or second year to avoid potential conflicts later in the program.

## Example

Each participating farmer in the RTI-CSA managed his or her own CSA operation, meaning that farms were competing with one another to attract members. The group of farmers in the RTI-CSA, however, worked well together because there was little overlap in the products offered and many employees purchased shares from more than one farm. Particularly in year two of the program, individual farmers who had products that would compete directly with another farm opted not to offer selected products. When it became apparent that enough demand existed for such items, those farmers again included the items in RTI shares. This was an unspoken agreement among the group.

## Cooperative Extension Support for Workplace CSA

Cooperative extension and other groups, such as nonprofit organizations, can serve as outside initiators of workplace and other group-based CSA programs. Outside initiators have expertise and contacts that are valuable to both farmers and businesses interested in a workplace CSA.

### Identification and Recruitment of a Host Company

Through interactions within their community and research on local companies, extension agents can identify potential consumer groups, including workplaces, to host a CSA program. Following identification, agents may also work to recruit CSA hosts through written correspondence, face-to-face meetings, and other promotional efforts. This guide can serve as a useful resource in developing recruitment materials and providing information on the benefits and requirements of being a CSA host.

### Matching Consumer Interests with Local CSA Farms

One lesson learned in the RTI-CSA project is the importance of matching CSA farm and consumer interests. A survey of consumers at a potential host company or organization should precede the creation of the farmer group to be involved in the program. The consumer interest survey conducted at RTI before the project began (see Appendix 2) is a good example of research that can be conducted by Extension to assure the success of a CSA partnership.

Survey information will identify the number of shares that consumers at the host company are likely to buy. This num-

ber, in turn, should determine the number of farms that initially participate in a CSA program. Optimally, there should be sufficient consumer interest so that each farm in the program can sell the minimum of number shares needed to make the CSA a viable part of the farm's overall marketing program. In some cases, survey results will indicate that consumer interest is only sufficient for one farm in the CSA partnership. A consumer survey will also provide information on the products consumers are most interested in buying through CSA. This information, too, should be used to determine the make-up of the farmer group or single farm that a host organization will partner with.

Farms in the program will have a greater opportunity for success if they offer products that their market demands. Initially, consumer feedback may exclude some farms from participating in a CSA partnership; however, as the consumers at a host company or organization learn more about CSA and have positive CSA experiences, their interests may expand to include other products and farms in the program. Further, a host organization may serve as a test market for less-common products to be sold through CSA, with the understanding on the part of the farm that they are likely to sell only a small number of shares. Because of their knowledge of local producers, extension agents are in a good position to identify farms that are a "good fit" for a CSA host and facilitate the creation of a partnership between the host and local CSA farms.

### Facilitating a Strong CSA Partnership

Based on the interests of the workplace host and the farms, Extension may con-

tinue involvement in a workplace CSA or similar project to facilitate a good working relationship between the CSA partners. Activities may include helping partners develop a formal agreement on how their CSA program will work, arranging meetings between farmer and host representatives, and identifying and delegating tasks to each partner during the initial stages of the project.

The facilitating agent may also serve as a resource person to the volunteer committee at the host workplace by providing general information on CSA for promotional materials, advising on promotional activities, and leading consumer informational workshops. Similarly, agents can continue to support participating farms in the CSA partnership. One critical service to farms is to conduct follow-up consumer surveys at the host company or organization. Information gathered in follow-up surveys of the RTI-CSA project played an important role in helping farmers design CSA shares that met the needs of the RTI market. Extension can play a lead role in conducting similar surveys as well as assisting farmers to apply the feedback they receive from consumers to strengthen their individual CSA programs.



## Conclusion

The success of the RTI-CSA project suggests that similar workplace CSA projects or partnerships between CSA farms and other community groups—such as churches, neighborhoods, and civic groups—are viable direct marketing strategies for farmers. Such a partnership provides unique benefits to the CSA host, consumers within the host group, and the participating farmers. External agents, such as Cooperative Extension Centers and nonprofit organizations, can assist in initiating CSA projects. Ultimately, projects should be self-sustaining and operated fully by the host and farm partners.

By its fourth year, the RTI-CSA project reached this goal of complete management by the host workplace and farmers. Table 1 provides a summary of participation in the RTI-CSA program. Six CSA farms currently sell shares to RTI employees, and more than 10 percent of RTI employees participate in the program. Several key factors have contributed to its success:

- Involvement of a volunteer committee of dedicated RTI employees.
- Effective use of RTI's communication channels for promotion and recruitment.
- Farmer responsiveness to consumer feedback to develop shares that fit RTI consumer interests.

Lessons learned in the RTI-CSA project can be used to replicate similar projects in rural and urban communities throughout the United States.

Table 1. Summary of farm and consumer participation in the RTI-CSA program from 2003 to 2005

Calendar Year	Project Year	Number of Participating Farms	Number of Shares Sold
2003	1	11	118
2004	2	6 (1 new)	190
2005	3	6	200

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### **National Campaign for Sustainable Agriculture**

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Pine Bush, NY 12566  
phone 845-744-8448, fax 845-744-8477  
e-mail:  
campaign@sustainableagriculture.net  
<http://www.sustainableagriculture.net>

## **CSA Resource list**

### **Alternative Farming Systems Information Center**

National Agricultural Library, ARS, USDA  
10301 Baltimore Ave., Room 304  
Beltsville, MD 20705-2351  
phone 301-504-6559, fax 301-504-6409  
e-mail: [afsic@nal.usda.gov](mailto:afsic@nal.usda.gov)  
<http://www.nal.usda.gov/afsic>

### **Robyn Van En Center for CSA Resources**

Fulton Center for Sustainable Living  
Wilson College  
1015 Philadelphia Ave  
Chambersburg PA 17201  
phone 717-264-4141 ext. 3352; fax 717-264-1578  
e-mail: [info@csacenter.org](mailto:info@csacenter.org)  
<http://www.csacenter.org>

### **Appropriate Technology Transfer for Rural Areas**

P.O. Box 3657  
Fayetteville AR 72702  
phone 800-346-9140  
(M-Th 8:30am-4:30pm CST; F 8:30am-12:30pm CST)  
<http://www.attra.org/>

### **Biodynamic Farming and Gardening Association**

P.O. Box 29135  
Bldg 1002B, Thoreau Center, The Presidio  
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