

# CSA Retention Survey Part 2: Alternative Vegetable Subscription Options

by Sally Worley

Earlier this year, Practical Farmers of Iowa conducted a third-party survey of non-renewing CSA members. The winter newsletter issue outlined various perspectives on CSA membership and some reasons for non-renewal learned from this survey. This issue details several alternative CSA options that some farmers are experimenting with in response to customer feedback. Survey results indicated people who did not renew would rejoin if more flexible options, such as the following examples illustrate, were available through their local CSA.

## Every-Other-Week and Partial Season Options

Some Iowa CSAs are already offering these alternatives. Jan Libbey and Tim Landgraf of One Step at a Time Garden, near Kanawha, offer an every-other-week share. These CSA members receive a full-size share in alternating weeks during the main season, for a total of nine distributions. The every-other-week option accommodates both small families and travelers. Jan and Tim split the summer season into partial seasons: an "early Green and Sweet" segment that covers the first part of the summer season, and a "Savor-the-Summer" segment that covers the remaining 11 weeks of their main season. These options allow members to sign up for the part of the season they are in town, or when their favorite produce is available.

## CSA Share Add-ons



◀ Jan and Tim also have a plethora of add-on options to allow for more customization. CSA members have the option to add a fruit, herb, gourmet, fall greens, Thanksgiving or Christmas share. They can also buy kits –

such as pesto, salsa, canning and roasting – to get large quantities of items for these purposes. Tim: **"We have the ability to grow many different products. Some go over well, some don't. By creating a pesto kit, we are able to sell basil and garlic to those who want larger quantities of these items."**

## Flexible CSAs



◀ Larry Cleverley, of Cleverley Farm near Mingo, offered a flexible CSA for the first time in 2012. **"Through the year I heard that one of the reasons people don't join CSAs is that**

**they're hesitant to make a commitment for the entire season. People who did join CSAs often got things they didn't like, too much of something or too many things in a row."** Larry marketed his flexible CSA through Facebook and Twitter, where he would suggest share contents. Interested parties would custom-order a box containing the items they were interested in. Commitment was week to week. "Feedback was phenomenal," he said, adding that he plans to expand the program this year.



◀ The Hohl family, which operates Harvestville Farm near Donnellson, added a week-to-week flexible CSA to their traditional CSA

in 2012 as well. They advertised available produce on Facebook and sold 15 to 35 boxes weekly. The boxes were not customizable, but people were able to learn the contents ahead of time. Many pre-ordered and the Hohl family also had walk-in sales at the retail barn on their farm. Adam Hohl says the first year was such a success they plan to drop the

traditional CSA this year and only have the flexible CSA. **"The number one reason [customers] enjoyed this model was because they didn't have to make a 16-week commitment or put money down up-front,"** he says.

## Farm Stand Debit Cards

Some farms are offering, in lieu of a traditional CSA box, farm stand debit cards where a customer purchases a pre-paid debit card at the beginning of the season to use at that particular farm. Similar to the idea of a CSA, the debit cards give farmers cash flow and guaranteed revenue in the spring, when they need it.



◀ Ellen Walsh-Rosmann, of Pin Oak Place near Harlan, switched from a traditional CSA in 2012 to a punch card model in spring 2013. **"Having a young baby and other enterprises on the farm, this gives me less pressure to have a traditional box ready each week,"** Ellen says. The punch card also gives her customers flexibility: They can purchase exactly what they want, when they want it, while still making a financial commitment to the farm by pre-purchasing a set amount of product.

Customers also don't have to worry about who will pick up their produce when they are out of town, or how to prepare (or else give away) an item they don't prefer.

With this option, customers also frequently get a discount, such as 10 percent, for purchasing a farm debit or punch card. In Ellen's case, her customers can buy a \$45 card worth \$50 of produce, a \$90 card worth \$100 of produce or a \$135 card that's good for \$150 of produce, and pick it up at their convenience at either the on-farm store (Farm Sweet Farm) or the Omaha farmers market. ■

For the full report online at [www.practicalfarmers.org/horticulture](http://www.practicalfarmers.org/horticulture)