

Community Shared Agriculture

Putting the Culture Back Into Agriculture

by Roger Samson

Dan Wiens is perhaps the most outspoken advocate of Community Shared Agriculture (CSA) farming in Canada and is the independent inventor of the concept. He farms near, Manitoba with his wife

In the winter of 1992-93, he was hired by the Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Association to establish four more CSA farms on the prairies. By the end of 1993, Wiens had set-up more than twenty CSA farms on the prairies. Nationally, the number of CSA farms increased from four in 1992 to 40.

Dan Wiens was a feature speaker at the recent annual Guelph Organic Conference where Roger Samson had an opportunity to ask Wiens about his CSA experience.

How did you come up with the idea of CSA?

I would have to go back to 1986 when my wife and I arrived in Africa. We had gone to Africa with these grand illusions of somehow helping these people growing their food. Somehow saving them from their misery. We arrived at a homestead, an African dwelling, and it was exactly how I wanted it to be. It had none of the amenities such as running water or electricity. It had mud for walls and grass for roof. The people were just eking out a living by growing enough food for themselves and selling a little bit to a neighbour. That first night that I had arrived, I finally felt that I had found a place that needs development, that needs me, and was quite excited. But over the course of just a few weeks the tables were turned and I realized that I was the one that needed saving not them. They had their ideas in place and it was my life that needed developing. Through my western eyes over the past 25 years I had come to believe if I didn't have a certain amount of amenities, food, comfort and standard of living that somehow I was underdeveloped. But I learned that the reality of the substance of what we are as humans can be summed up in one word and that is relationships.

I don't mean to romanticize the area, there certainly were poor people who didn't have their life worked out, but many of the people did. They were living in a very ecologically and socially balanced way. They had a circle of people that they supported and who supported them through their agricultural practices and their life.

So, you found Africa to be more developed than you first thought and you were the one that was actually developing with the experience?

That's right, I felt that I hadn't fully developed but they at least turned me in the right direction. We did come back with the idea that it is North America that needs a lot of development in our attitudes and also in the way we acquire our food. We came back with the realization that its good to be human, and its okay to be human, and that we don't have to think our industrial thought out all the way through to the end?? degree....to the point we have dehumanized ourselves with every gadget and everything we could imagine. So when we got back we got into organic farming or environmentally happy farming. You can see this whole CSA thing evolved over time it just didn't happen overnight. The turning point came for me two years after we had gotten back to Canada. We had been growing vegetables and fruit in what we had perceived as a sustainable manner. But economically and socially we weren't very close to where we wanted to be. I went to a farm rally in Winnipeg with 7000 other farmers who were protesting that food prices were so low that farmers couldn't make a living any more. I didn't go for the same reasons most of the other fellows and ladies went. Most were protesting for the government to give more assistance or handouts. My understanding of our system and what was wrong with it, wasn't going to be solved by another government handout. It was a systemic problem and it needs a systemic solution, it needs a change of thought and a total change in the way we do things. Because we had been in Southern Africa, we saw what the separation of peoples does and the misunderstandings it creates.... and I sort of transposed that to our agricultural sector and the separation we had between city and country. The separation is vast geographically, the average food in Canada travels 2000 km I think before it reaches the table. Also as a matter of course, the paths of farmers and city folks don't cross generally speaking there are wholesalers and all sorts of people in between. There is a huge lack of understanding both ways , farmers don't really understand city folk and where they are coming from and city people don't understand farmers. It was at that meeting that I decided that the answer for me wasn't another handout. The answer was finally for me in a very real and dramatic step to close that gap, between myself the farmer and the people for whom I am growing the food. The first step was that I called together a group of my friends, city folks and a couple of farmers I knew, and over the course of several meetings we came up with the idea of selling shares in a summer harvest. But more than just selling shares in the summer harvest we wanted to sell the risk of farming. In essence we could create the situation where it wasn't one farm family bearing the brunt of the viciousness of farming but a group of people. In our case it became 200

families... it softened it the point where it wasn't livelihood threatening for anybody anymore. I like the importance of farmers to teachers. Yet, farmers have been left adrift in a sea of economic instability even though they grow something very fundamental to our existence. Everybody needs food and yet we seem to think farmers are very expendable in our culture. Teachers, who nurture our children, aren't left in that sea. Teachers are too busy teaching our children to earn a living, so we provide a living for them. Why can't we wrap our minds around that concept for farmers. Farmers should be too busy nurturing the soil and growing good food to worry about earning a living. Somehow society should help provide a living for them.

Do you think the majority of people believe in farmers today?

Generally I think that a lot of people care and that they want to see the family farm survive. With CSA, you offer them a consumer choice that very deliberately works towards the survival of small scale family farming. The very simple principle of paying a dollar and seeing that whole dollar go to the family farmer is very compelling for people...but also its the fresh tasty vegetables as they ripen in the garden. I did a survey people and the idea of fresh tasty vegetables was number one on their list of reasons for participating in a CSA. Number two was chemical free organically grown vegetables. Also important was supporting the local economy and local farmers. Those were the four most frequently mentioned things in the survey.

What about the practical aspects, the blood and guts of CSA?

The blood and guts are compellingly simple. In the case of our farm, a group of 200 city people paid about \$200 the first year for a share. What a share means is that over the course of a harvest season from July to October we supply them with whatever is in the garden. I have two days a week I deliver the food to the sharers on Tuesdays and Thursdays. On Tuesday if I have one hundred sharers to service I go out in the garden and find what is there. If I have 4 or 5 vegetables ripening that day, such as cabbage, lettuce or zucchini, I'll just pick it up and bring it to my sorting shed. I'll then divide it by 100 and put it in the boxes and that's what the people get that day. The nifty thing about it is there is virtually no waste. I don't have to worry about a crop maturing before the time my wholesaler wants it. There is a lot of waste on a regular vegetable farm with the perishable vegetables like lettuce. On our farm, whatever is ripe and ready for the picking we pick and people take. The vegetables are then put into blue box recycling boxes and loaded onto my two ton truck for transport to the depots. In the city we have people who act as community coordinators to help distribute the food. These are volunteers who love

the idea. Typically, I'll just back up into someone's driveway and unload 30 boxes into a garage. People know when the pickup times. I'll generally hang around for about 20 minutes at each stop if people want to talk to their farmer that day. Also, some people who don't do their own composting, bring compostable materials which I bring back to the farm. It is a no energy using recycling system because I'm there anyway delivering vegetables. It is a closed system. The only problem with it is that it is a bit time consuming to wash out the last bits of material from the blue boxes.

When does your supply season begin?

Our season usually begins about the beginning of July and ends in the beginning of October. Our season is pretty short in Manitoba. I am hoping to extend the season into June. At the end of the season we give them a supply of storage vegetables such as potatoes and divide up the remaining vegetables. It works great from the farmers perspective because we have a guaranteed market from spring on. We can plan our garden very closely because we know how much we need to grow. We factor in for bad weather and plant a few more things.

How many different crops are you growing?

I grow 100 different varieties of vegetables. That would include say 4 or 5 different varieties of onions. In terms of types of vegetables we grow over 30. It is a very mixed farm in that sense. In our letter of agreement with the sharers, we have an anticipated amounts of vegetables, to give people a concrete idea of what they can expect. I think that is important. We are providing a service for people and it is important to do things right. But I also make it clear to folks that this isn't about cheap food.

One of our sharers summed things really well after the first year when he said this really isn't about an economic arrangement. This shared farming is really about friendship. It's putting the culture back into agriculture. The reason I say that is that I wouldn't bugger up my friend. If these people really are my friends I want to give them the best produce possible.

What about the guy who wants more asparagus and less potatoes?

Tough luck, in general. However, we do some customizing for people with health problems. If they have problems digesting potatoes, I'll give them more sweet corn than for example. But we can't give to everybody whatever their palate desires. We are trying to get people to expand their culinary paradigm, not around what we have now in our demand economy ... whatever our heart desires we go out and buy.... but to start planning our menus around a more natural cycle of what the land is providing. We want to maintain that principle.

What about the consumer? You provide a solution for the summer and fall, but then they are right back in the grocery stores in the winter.

Our sharers could still be eating garlic onions carrots and potatoes from the fall. Some CSA's supply winter vegetables once a month through the winter. Overtime we'll probably end up doing that but we don't have good storage facilities for now. The other thing we encourage people to do is preserve because they often get more than they can use in a week in the summer. We give them a piece of paper telling them how they can preserve corn for example. Preserving used to be a large part of how we did things.

We do some season extension but there is a certain point where ecologically it doesn't make sense in the winter months.

What do you think are some weaknesses of CSA?

I don't consider the limited season a problem. It is a weakness in our own attitude. We think we can have whatever we want whenever we want. That is the problem. From the farmers point of view it is not for everybody. The reason I say that is that if you don't like people you may as well forget trying it. There are people who don't like people. That type of farmer shouldn't get involved. One of the major hindrances with CSA's is the price of land near major cities. CSA's work best when they are really close to the people that they are serving. In these areas the land is sold not at agricultural prices but at residential development so the land price is a barrier.

How much land and equipment do you need in Manitoba to feed 200 sharers for four months?

It depends on cultural practices. If you are fairly intensive then you need about 10 acres. I have several small tractors including a 1949 Massey pony. You can get away with much less than \$20,000 if you can

get people to come up pick up right on the farm. People are doing it without any tractors by using wheel hoes and rototillers.

How much can you take home after expenses from the 200 sharers at \$200/each?

At least half can be kept by the farm family. Labour is the biggest expense. If you can keep that within the family then you are away. The seed costs and things are generally not that high. You can get away with under \$1000 in seed costs. If you don't have a lot of capital costs to pay off then you can make a decent return for 7 months work. On the Canadian prairies I am coming to the conclusion that you can't make your total income from a CSA vegetable farm unless you have very few expenses. Because \$20,000 generally isn't enough for most people to make a living off of. I think that other cottage industries on the farm is going to be part of the solution to making these farms economically viable. On our farm we are going a little bit into bedding plants which is good income source in spring time. We also have a few animals and a U-Pick Raspberry operation. I am also a carpenter. Last year I had several months work from our sharers after putting a notice in one of our newsletters. If a CSA farmer has any other skills other than farming he can offer his services to the established network of people. When I tell people about CSA I don't mean to be prescriptive. I am descriptive. I tell people about what we have done and they can use that information for their own situation. By nature no CSA farm is going to be identical to another, because humans and communities are so diverse.

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