



**Food Bank Farm CSA:
Beth McMahon's Notebook**

In January 2008, I had the opportunity to attend the Guelph Organic Conference. While there, I sat in on the half day Community Shared Agriculture (CSA) workshop with Michael Docter of Food Bank Farm, Mass.

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Background

Michael Docter's been farming for 30 years. Many years ago, Docter and some friends started the "chili project" with a local food bank, growing everything that would be need for veggie chili. This was a "sexy project", but it wasn't making money, so they decided to pursue CSA model.

The group approached the food bank to buy the land need for a CSA after they found a loan guarantor. They then fund raised after that to pay for loan and did so in three years.

After several years of learning and growing the CSA, Docter requested that the food bank "spin him off". The CSA is now owned by him, but the physical farm remains in the food bank's ownership.

In a creative partnership, Docter now pays for all the direct costs for the farm (23-24,000/year), as well as donates half the weight of all the food grown back to the food bank (that's about 200,000 pounds). Some of the donated food is grown specifically for food bank (squash, carrots, beets etc.) and the rest is surplus food.

Food Bank Farm consists of 50 acres—30 owned by food bank and 20 of this is leased/bartered from other landowners. The farm is financially sustainable with \$600,000/yr in sales from the CSA and extra sales, which is about an even income split.

How Food Bank Farm's CSA Works

The CSA has 700 shares between 1300 households. Docter proclaims that he "gives them a good deal and good selection" to keep them happy.

How good a deal? It's \$670 for big share (feeds 5-7 people) or \$475 for regular (3-5 people). This is weekly between June-October, then once a month for November and December. According to an independent study, a share costs *less than half* of what it would be for the same amount of organic produce in a supermarket.

People pick-up their food directly from the farm, but CSA members don't work there.

"If you're getting people out to the farm, they'll stick with you," and he doesn't give a discount for volunteering either.

Docter found the typical CSA model too restrictive and prescriptive, so he's opted to offer choices: members are given a bag and they can fill up the bag however they choose (volume based). It was "terrifying" at first, but it all worked out. Now members have one bag for greens, one for root vegetables etc. For large items, like cantaloupes, members are just told how many they can take.

The CSA program also makes use of a magnetic board to show availability. When item is gone, it's removed from the board and people don't know what they missed.

Members love getting lots of greens and find them very valuable, but they don't cost much to produce. The high cost for greens in the store is because of transportation, says Docter.

At Food Bank Farm, they don't make own salad mixes – members do it themselves (so don't have to have arugula if they don't like it, where someone else may only want it). This approach also helps avoid food prep/safety issues too.

Docter states that the members biggest complaint is that they get "too much", so they've started shaving down quantities over the past few years.

Adding Value

At Food Bank Farm, there's also an on-site farm store. Manager (Sherry) has been there for many years and is "face of farm" and she really knows customers.

They've developed a product mix to enable members to avoid conventional grocery store for "months on end". The store offers some special items once a week ie. chicken for sale from another farm. There's local milk (not organic) and this has really helped keep customers with them, as it's a prime reason people have to go to the regular grocery store. Dairy prices are low too, because it's sourced right down the road. What's also nice about the store is that products are labeled with food miles wherever possible.

Increasingly, Food Bank Farm has been added value added selections. They do five kinds of salad dressings, four varieties of pestos, several jams, quiches, baked goods etc. There's even a bicycle-powered grinder for grinded corn meal, which is used to make corn muffins and other products. This offers a great story and significant profit margin.

Value-added products are consistent and routine, but they only offer one choice per week—so there's variety and people have to keep checking back for their favourites.

The store is for members only, which is a great member perk. Docter also believes it gives them an added flexibility in consideration to food safety/inspection, because it's not public. He does stress that food safety is a huge concern for the farm, and they are extremely cautious and diligent—making someone sick is very bad for business!

There is one exception to the “members only” rule at the store, and that's the weekend before Thanksgiving. At that time, the farm and store is open to the public. It's a huge event, and everything is decorated. There's dried flowers, turkey, pies, herb mixtures for sale etc., and the farm makes 8-10% of it's annual gross.

People Power

Food Bank Farm has two part-time staff in store and seven in field. Five are live-in apprentices and the others are salary (\$10-11/hr). Sherry, the store manager who's been there for nine years, earns \$25/hr. There's one-person in charge of kitchen, who also works on farm during the week. This is an intern position, and goal is to have this person to stay on for at least 3-4 years. Food Bank Farm also get some volunteers, mostly from local colleges.

When Food Bank Farm hires people, they do it by having them come out and work for a day. Docter strongly suggests that farms don't hire over the table, because they need hard-working individuals. He's made that mistake once and won't be doing it again.

Food Bank Farm is affected by labour shortages, so they are setting up a pension plan for those who've been with them for more than three years. They also offer two bonuses, one at the end of year and another for those returning next year. They also provide an empowering work arrangement for apprentices and staff through managerial responsibilities—everyone is a “boss” of a different area (ie. the tomato field). Docter wants employees to stay with the farm for years, and acknowledges that he personally need to be there and be hands-on.

“You gotta show them and bust your butt with them. They respect that.”

Nuts and Bolts

Monday, Wednesday and Friday are CSA pick-up days (and they try to not to work on Sundays), so there's a good schedule at the farm.

Day before the CSA pick-up:

Pick tomatoes. Stack tomatoes in plastic trays, one tomato deep. Note: sauce tomatoes are smaller and get bruised, as since people look for bigger ones, they sell sauce tomatoes for 7.50/box (outside of the share). The bigger ones are also sold individually.

Beets and carrots – top carrots and fork them into buckets (even with dirt) – do it as fast as possible.

Day of CSA:

6:00am pick greens before it's too hot. Beds all single crop. Use old pickle barrels – smooth inside and don't damage crop. This requires 3-4 people and takes an hour.

They don't grow too much head lettuce and mostly do “adolescent” lettuce, which doesn't damage as easily as baby. They put water in the container and then move the contents to wicker/bushel baskets, handling it minimally (Note: to avoid mold problems, they stack baskets upside down in pyramid form in sun).

8-9:00am go pick brassicas. Storage cabbage – keep outer leaves on. Put upside down and cure the stem cuts in sun (about 1/2-1 hours). Cauliflower is very fragile, so leave some leaf matter on to protect.

Dew is now dried up, so they move onto vine crops: There are usually three annual plantings of summer squash (of which there's 3-4 varieties). Ensure early picking, because if fruit gets too big it sends message to the plant that it's done producing. They pour water over summer squash to cool down them too. Cucumbers—they've got three varieties and do two plantings per year.

Next are eggplant and peppers. Michael is fond of the Italia peppers—very sweet and seems resistant to corn bore, good for roasting, and good flavour.

Then they're off to pick melons—3-4 varieties. They pick them full slip, when melon comes off easily. They grow several varieties of watermelons too—to test ripeness, they open and eat. All melons are in plastic and Reemay (when strong enough). This helps keep cucumber beetles away too. Food Bank Farm also rents land with sandy soils to do melons well.

Food Bank Farm doesn't refrigerate any produce—everything is cooled by water. This is also better in short term too, because it's less pressure on cell walls of produce.

They use town water, but irrigate with a small river using overhead and drip (for melons and eggplant with plastic).

Everything is direct seeded, except for tomatoes, peppers, and eggplants. They are now putting in a greenhouse to do their own starts.

Man vs. Machine

Docter is well known for balancing the use of human and equipment power. With more than 250 varieties of vegetables, flowers and herbs, he's got to cost out time and money, and look for economical solutions to labour.

The farm has about 15 gas-powered tractors, which are \$3-4,000/each. Docter prefers to use older ones, which are light and avoid compaction. Each tractor is set-up with its own equipment, which saves on the time switching everything around.

Docter also looks for rental options. For example, Food Bank Farms does one acre of wholesale carrots (.25/lb). This past year, they planted winter storage carrots on July 4th, after weed pressure was down. It then takes six hours to pick with a digger (\$14,000 new for machine, which also picks other root vegetables, but Docter rents it from guy down the road for \$40/hr)—grossing \$40,000.

Another creative approach is the Food Bank Farm U-pick. This includes strawberries, sugar snap peas on the trellis, cherry and plum tomatoes, green beans, flowers (one acre of 4-5 plantings with more than 50 varieties), and more than 20 types herbs. It's all part of the share and members can pick what they want. This reduces labour, while adding value for members. You also won't find bunched radishes in the CSA—too much time for no value.

Details: Equipment and Weeds

“Some people may know the scientific name for weeds,” says Docter, but on his farm there are two kinds of weeds, “in row and between row”.

Rotations at Good Food Farm are based on weed management. They take good notes, grading every field in August from #1-5, then compare to previous year's field history. They then plant weed sensitive crops in clean soil. After each crop is done, they disc so weeds don't seed.

For in-row weeding, the Bezzerides (www.bezzerides.com) is used. This includes strawberries, where he doesn't cover crowns, then performs a quick hoe. They plant 60" centre to centre on strawberries, then disc the centres then at end of season to encourage new growth (Note: A man in audience uses geese for weeding strawberries in fall).

The farm also uses a flame weeder on wheels. This is set at constant height, which can then “run down rows”. There's also the basket weeder (designed before green revolution), which is very effective when weeds are in the thread stage, as it's close to crops, and doesn't throw dirt. Can buy them for \$2,000 or so, and it does 1-3 rows.

Compost—if you're not careful, you can bring in huge weed load, says Docter. Poorly managed, the compost can put the weeds back in the fields, so only use on crops that are weed tolerant and “appreciative”.

He also doesn't use foliar sprays, "Considering the issues of the spinach e.coli, you're asking for problems".

To make beds, the farm uses a Meeker harrow to knock "trash" out of way (straw, hay etc.) for the seeder. The seeder follows to clean up harrow's tracks. They then use Planet Jr (drill type seeder) for seeding and it makes parallel lines. It can do up to 3-rows per bed (lettuce, onions etc.).

He also uses a trencher for bed preparation. They plant the tomatoes and peppers starts in the trench and cover with Reemay. When the weeds come up, they drive the basket weeder over and eliminate trench. After this, they build the tent structure with stakes to hold up Reemay over the tomatoes and peppers. In doing so, they start on the crops 10 days before anyone else.

The farm also uses Reemay cover for Asian greens for flea beetles—uncover, pick, re-cover—all season long. Docter prefers Typar—the heaviest Reemay can get—and then uses it for 5-7 years: use remay for greens first couple years, then to staked tomatoes/peppers, then the early lettuce uses the older/holey stuff, as there no bug pressure there. Food Bank Farm also has a cabbage root maggot problem until soil warms up, so again, they use Reemay.

Plastic is reserved for early tomatoes, melons, and eggplant. They plant plastic at least one week before planting to capture moisture. This will also help kill weeds. To kill weeds on the edges of plastic, they go through with an implement and then manually hoe.

Generally, Docter likes to under sow with clover quite a bit for nitrogen. He uses clover in crops where mechanical cultivation is impossible, so it also helps weed suppression (ie. tomatoes with stakes). Docter's other green manure ideas were succulents (ie. field peas and buckwheat to hold some land for a couple months), and oat/vetch mix in August, and then rye.

In the Spring, Docter rents a five bottom plow and tractor for \$17/acre and plows and cuts the rye down. He doesn't disc because it compresses soil. After the plow comes through (mid-April), he waits for weeds to germinate (you don't see them, it's just the thread form), then does stale bedding the week before planting—up to three or four times before planting with adjustable springs. This turns up threads and the sun kills them, but admittedly, it's not great for soil management.

More Tips

Garlic is a big part of farm. Only the scapes are part of CSA, selling the "green" garlic for 1-2 weeks in Spring and then \$0.85-1.00 per head (\$6000 year). To cure, they bend the top 1/3 over and tie up, then wash the day before selling.

Garlic planting—two cultivators 18” apart and deep (12”). One person throws garlic into trench, then another person comes behind and spaces them 6”, another person follows and picks up extras. They use a harrow to collapse soil over bed. In 3-4 hours with 6 people, they can plant an acre. Good Food Farm uses shredded leaves on garlic, which are free from landscaper and spread by volunteers.

A significant acreage is also committed to winter squash, as this helps contribute to the food bank donations (remember, they donate 50% of their crop’s weight). Docter uses commercial organic blood meal with winter squash. Also goes out after planting and stale beds again with winter squash. He direct seeds and doesn’t use plastic for cucumber beetles, “Beetles only eat first leaves and will leave others to ensure there’s a “meal for next year”, whereas transplants taste entirely like first leaves”.

Observations and Advice

Food Bank Farms is situated in a very competitive environment, “there’s another CSA every direction you go within 10miles”. Docter believes that this has severed to heighten awareness and it’s good for market.

“We’re also ruthless about sending customers spam,” says Docter, who sends one or two emails per week. He tells members about what’s going on that week and what the special options are—from fish to muffins. He advises other CSA manager to tell stories about farm and use humour.

“Scale is essential for profitability”. Docter thinks that 400 shareholders is the minimum to pay “yourself a salary and fair wages”. This requires about 15 acres. He also suggests that CSA’s keep some chickens and/or goats, as it’s good for agri-tourism.

Docter advises new entrants to focus on what you’re good at growing. Corn and sweet potatoes don’t grow on their land, so he trades with other farms for them.

Docter also believes that one of biggest mistake that organic farmers make is finding unfarmed land.

“There’s a reason it wasn’t farmed. It costs same to buy good, as it is bad land, so buy good soil!”

Docter is quick to point out that having a CSA requires adaptability, constant innovation and creative problem thinking. He uses computers for all farm record keeping: seeding rates, calendar, crop rotations etc. and suggests Excel, but says any spreadsheet good, “The important thing is just to keep records”.

Docter also realizes that different models work for different farms. For example, his friend has a winter CSA program. There’s a large root cellar system and the CSA is simply a self-serve honor system, open everyday, and no staff—making \$40,000/year!

As evidenced by the length of this article, there was a lot of information to capture and I hope you've found it useful. The growth of CSA's in Atlantic Canada has been quite striking to me in the last few years and it's a trend I know will grow. To read more about the Food Bank Farm, you can visit www.foodbankwma.org/farm/.