

# Canadian farmmanager

Fresh ideas for better farm management

December 2010

## CSA farms come of age

**D**an Wiens has seen them come and go – idealistic would-be farmers eager to get back to the land, produce wholesome fare, and re-connect a distant public to the food they consume.

Having just finished his 19th season operating a Community Shared Agriculture (CSA) farm, the 50-year-old Manitoban has become – to his own surprise – one of the pioneers of the movement.

“We just sort of muddled our way into it,” jokes Wiens, who crops 10 acres of vegetables at St. Adolphe, a few minutes south of Winnipeg. “There was a bit of an explosion in the early 90s and a lot of farmers tried it. So I thought, ‘Yeah, society is ready for this.’”

Wiens has off-farm employment but says his farm produces steady profits and has allowed he and wife Wilma to earn a decent living while raising four children. And, he adds, they’ve been able to enjoy a lifestyle that wouldn’t have been possible either in the city or on a typical commercial farm.

Although precise figures are hard to come by, more and more people are following Wiens down a trail he helped blaze. The growing number of CSA farmers prompted the USDA to include them in its farm census for the first time in 2007. It found there were 12,549 operations in the U.S. that classified themselves as CSA farms (although south of the border, CSA stands for Community Supported Agriculture). There’s no census figure for Canada, but the number is well into the hundreds.

And the perception that CSA farms are fringe operations is taking a knock, too.

This year, two of the six regional finalists in Canada’s Outstanding Young Farmers’ program are CSA farmers, and a third is also a market gardener who also sells direct to the public through an on-farm market and U-pick enterprise.

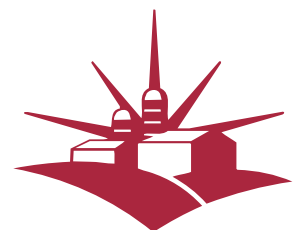
“I think this is the first year that the CSA model has produced a regional winner, and to have two in one year is really quite unique,” says OYF project manager Joan Cranston, noting that financial performance and management are key criteria for the award.

“People are embracing the whole ‘Eat Local’ concept. I think the nominations show that people are making the CSA model work and making those (types of) farms profitable.”

Wiens says you won’t get rich from a CSA farm but they are economically viable, and an outstanding career choice for those who want to work outdoors, are passionate about food, and have a flair for entrepreneurial innovation.

“They’re here to stay just as farmers’ markets are here to stay,” he says. “They’re becoming a fixture.”

This edition of the *Canadian Farm Manager* takes a look at several farms (including the Outstanding Young Farmer nominees) with an eye to better understanding both the pitfalls and potential of Community Shared Agriculture.



Canadian Farm Business  
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# Farming their own way

Entrepreneurs with a social conscience; Web savvy meets traditional market gardening; CSA farmers and their farms defy stereotypes

**F**or most conventional farmers, this thing called Community Shared Agriculture looks kinda weird.

They don't know the half of it.

It's both a social movement and a breeding ground for cutting-edge entrepreneurs. It is a throwback to the market gardens of a century ago and a child of the Internet age. And it's both trendy and old-fashioned all at the same time.

What's at the heart of this brand of farming? Here are some views from two leading practitioners:

*"Operating a CSA or being part of one is definitely a political act. This is very much about the politics of food."*

*"If you're in a CSA, you're in direct marketing. I tell people that if you don't have a web page, you might as well stop now."*

*"My basic message is that this is like any other farm business, you've got to know your costs and crunch your numbers."*

*"Market gardening is an art. Fifty years ago, there were all kinds of market gardens around cities — lots of people had those juggling skills of being able to grow a lot of things and have some ready for sale every week. That's why I call it an art, and that's why I say it takes time to learn it."*

The first two comments are from Nova Scotia farmer Patricia Bishop, and the second pair are from Ontario grower Steve Cooper. Both are 2010 regional winners of the Outstanding Young Farmer program, the first two CSA operators to win the award. (Bishop along with Steve and Lisa Cooper are pictured on the front page.)

Art and politics; two very different types of market savvy; and hard-headed financial analysis: The world of CSA farms is complex. But it's also one that — despite being spread across a vast country — is tightly connected. For example, even though their farms are about 1,500 kilometres apart, the origins of Cooper's CSA Farm and Maze and Bishop's TapRoot Farms are intertwined. Cooper and Bishop's husband, Josh Oulton, met through the CTEAM agricultural management program put on by the George Morris Centre, and ended up helping each other develop and refine their CSA business plans.

That's another characteristic of this type of farming: Peek behind one CSA, and you'll usually find several others that have played a mentoring role. The movement, as its practitioners frequently call it, has created its own version of an ag extension service. Newcomers can tap into an extensive knowledge base, all developed at a grassroots level and spread through blogs, YouTube videos, and websites.

Contrast this to the experience of Dan Wiens. When he started, he hadn't even heard of the term CSA, so he dubbed it 'shared farming' — hence his farm's name: Wiens Shared Farms.

"My wife and I didn't start out with a goal of being where we're at today," says Wiens. "Every year brought new opportunities and we would just grab them and see where they led."

The amount of information and support available to today's CSA start-ups is like night and day, says Wiens.

The Internet not only plays an integral part in attracting wannabe CSA farmers and showing them how to get started, it's also creating a customer base. Consider Bishop's case — she only had to announce she was starting one and customers started to call. Or rather, email. TapRoot Farms was launched with 220 'shareholders' — 95% of whom were people Bishop had never met, and never talked to. Stories like this are not uncommon.

"The limiting factor isn't the number of people wanting to get their food from a CSA, it's the number of farmers who are crazy enough to farm this way and try to earn a livelihood from it," says Wiens.

This points to another factor that makes CSAs hard to pin down: People such as Bishop and Cooper, who grew up on a farm, are in the minority. Most, as Wiens puts it, "tend to be urban people who don't know better."

Joking aside, Wiens is bullish on CSAs and the opportunities they offer people who want to make a living growing food.

"I don't believe they're going to grow to the point where they're going to be the main source of food for a major portion of the population but, just like farmers' markets, they're here to stay," he says.

"And I think it's a fantastic career choice for people who enjoy a particular style of agriculture — one that is smaller scale, diversified, and is low in terms of external inputs."



CSA farming isn't just about earning a living for Dan Wiens and Brenda Hsueh: It's also about incorporating their faith and social principles into their work life. On the left, Wiens (who works part of the year for the Mennonite Central Committee) is shown in Uganda earlier this year. Above, Hsueh rototills her fields at her farm in Chesley, Ont.

## ... and finding new ways to succeed

There are two ways you might tell the story of Brenda Hsueh and her CSA start-up.

If you view this type of farming as the domain of naïve urbanites who are long on romantic ideas about getting back to the land, short on practical know-how, and driven by an ideological distrust of “corporate farming,” then you might highlight the following facts about Hsueh:

The 35-year-old grew up in the city, describes herself as being “raised on David Suzuki,” and had just one summer's worth of farm experience – at ‘an environmental learning centre’ called Everdale – before she bought her own 40-acre farm in Chesley, Ont. Last year, her first as a farmer, her total gross sales just met the \$7,000 cut-off needed to qualify as a farm for municipal tax purposes, and she didn't have much of anything to sell until September – three months later than planned. A CSA skeptic might also selectively highlight some of her frank confessions on her blog ([justblacksheep.com](http://justblacksheep.com)), such as how she discovered that naming your goat Monty and treating him like a pet makes it tough when you have to take him to the butcher.

But that's hardly the whole story. Consider, too, these facts:

Hsueh has a long-standing interest in eco-farming, and chose to volunteer at the Everdale Environmental Learning Centre ([everdale.org](http://everdale.org)) because her research had alerted her to the 50-acre organic farm's excellent reputation for training novice farmers. She not only obtained some hands-on farming experience at Everdale but also garnered the eco-farming equivalent of an executive MBA – learning what worked and what didn't for other CSAs and getting wired into the informal but extensive network that has grown up around organic farms and CSAs. The Edmonton native also drew on her experience in the financial industry, most recently at the bond-rating agency DBRS, to draft a long-term business plan that recognizes revenues and income will be low – and the learning curve steep – in her farm's start-up period.

“I know that I'm never going to make the kind of money that I did in the financial industry,” says Hsueh. “But I don't need to earn that kind of money. The priority for me is lifestyle and participating in something that means more to me than the financial industry.”

However, that doesn't mean finances aren't important.

“When I talk about sustainable agriculture, I mean ecologically, economically, and personally,” she says. “Sustainable is not working yourself to the bone from 5 a.m. to 7 p.m. every day in order to produce food that no one is willing

to pay the true cost of.”

The start-up of the farm is being financed by savings and the sale of her Toronto home. Her business plan calls for carefully staged expansion – she doubled in size to one acre this year, will plant two acres next year, and expects to top out at around four acres. Along with organic vegetables and herbs, the long-term plan also includes expanding into small-scale sheep and goat production, and then into cheese-making.

“My goal is to achieve \$20,000 of gross vegetable income off one acre,” says Hsueh. “I'm not there yet because I'm still working on soil fertility and my own production techniques, but there's no way a conventional farmer can gross that much (per acre) with low inputs and minimal equipment.”

Still, she's under no illusions about profit margins.

“I've had a lot of discussions about vegetable pricing,” she says. “We have a cheap-food policy and so many of the costs (in conventional agriculture) are externalized – no one is paying the true cost of food. So I know that I can't charge a price that would cover the full production cost and provide me with a reasonable salary for myself.”

And if her leap into farming seems a bit hasty – it was only six months after starting at Everdale that she bought her farm, a two-hour drive northwest of Toronto – it was also carefully planned.

Hsueh knew she wanted to be involved in so-called alternative food production but wasn't sure she was cut out to be a farmer. Everdale would not only give her knowledge but test her tolerance for the endless backbreaking cycle of setting out transplants, weeding, and picking that goes with market gardening.

“I knew I wanted to get into agriculture in some way, but I wasn't sure if it would be farming or something such as working for a non-governmental organization in Toronto,” says Hsueh. “But I wasn't at Everdale for long before I knew that being a producer was what I wanted to do.”

During her lengthy property search – the goal was to be as close as possible to Toronto, where she sells her produce – she lugged around an auger so she could perform what's called a ‘10% hydrochloric acid soil test.’ This involves taking out a three-foot-long plug of soil, examining the texture and colour of the top soil, subsoil and underlying layer; looking for microbial life; and using a



## Inspiration and co

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weak hydrochloric acid to test for the presence of calcium carbonate in the subsoil. Hsueh looked at dozens of properties and at every promising one, out came the auger.

"I think many of the (real-estate) agents were quite surprised (and) ... weren't expecting a short, Asian woman to be so seriously looking at farmland!" Hsueh wrote in her blog.

This is not a skill you learn working for a bond-rating agency, but this part of Hsueh's story illustrates the rich knowledge base that's now available through the Internet, organizations such as Everdale, and the informal network that connects people in the alternative farming movement. That knowledge base covers everything from agronomy to delivery methods, and is continually expanding and being improved.

That's another reason why Hsueh chose to be part of the CSA movement – it's a dynamic, innovative sector full of bright thinkers.

"Everybody I know in the eco-farming sector is always experimenting with something new," says Hsueh.

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Innovation and change have been constants from the moment in 1993 when Steve and Lisa Cooper, newly married and just out of ag college, joined Steve's parents on their cattle and cash-crop farm at Zephyr, Ont, about 80 kilometres northeast of Toronto.

Their goal from the start was to create a business profitable enough to employ them both fulltime. But the operation they took over wasn't able to do that

and, in the Coopers' view, the net income from cattle and cash crops seemed likely to shrink rather than increase. So the couple began experimenting with market garden crops. By 1999, they were selling their produce at farmers' markets in nearby Uxbridge and Newmarket, and as far away as Oshawa. In 2000, the cattle were replaced with goats, and an on-farm store and corn maze followed. By 2003, Lisa was able to quit her off-farm job, and in 2007, they began their CSA with 50 families receiving a weekly basket for 20 weeks.

That last bit wasn't part of the plan – the CSA was started because people asked for it, says Steve Cooper.

"We had started the entertainment end of it before and we essentially had people seeing what we were doing on the farm and saying, 'I want to be a part of it,'" he says. "For me, it was a light-bulb moment."

Cooper's CSA Farm and Maze ([coopersfarm.ca](http://coopersfarm.ca)) now has more than 500 families in its CSA program and its range of products is nearly as vast. Along with about 30 varieties of vegetables and fruits, the couple sells herbs, eggs, and meat (mostly beef and pork, but also lamb, goat, and wild game). They also started a winter share program for squash and root vegetables, as well as eggs and meat.

The Coopers sell more products than most, but a wide array of crops is simply a must because people expect a lot of variety in their weekly or bi-weekly baskets. (When asked to list his product offerings, Dan Wiens jokes, "It's easier for me to say what veggies we don't produce – which is potatoes and rutabagas.")





# nstant evolution

**THE MANY FACES OF CSA FARMS:** Far left: Brenda Hsueh; Middle: Steve and Lisa Cooper with children Trenton and Cayla and scenes from the Cooper's CSA farm and Maze; Above: Patricia Bishop and two of her children, Izaak and Lily.

This is the opposite of the business model employed by most farms, even those selling at farmers' markets, says Cooper.

"I network with Ontario Farm Fresh and for years, they preached that you should grow four or five things, purchase the rest, and devote your energies to the customer," he says. "That was a formula that worked for a lot of folks. So going into market gardening gave me reason to pause because the CSA model is to grow it all on your farm."

In all, the Coopers spent nine years developing the "art" of market gardening and selling at farmers' markets and their own store before starting their CSA.

"Whenever I talk to someone thinking of doing this, I say, '*Don't start with the CSA. Start with farmers' markets, and develop your skills that way,*'" says Cooper. "Once you start with a CSA, you've got to deliver – you've got to fill that box or basket every week. The last thing you want to do is put something into a box that is poor quality."

And, he notes, once you launch a CSA, the time available for dealing with production issues is going to quickly diminish

"This is a people business," says Cooper. "You are dealing with people always, always, always."

"Lisa and I are both people-oriented but you also have to make sure you have time to deal with people. So along with all the production demands, you have to be available and accountable to folks because you are their farmer."

This last point goes deeper than you might suspect, and reflects Patricia Bishop's point about this type of farming being "a political act."

CSAs attract people who are concerned about food safety and want either organic or 'naturally' produced food. They also want to support local farmers, and reduce the number of food miles in their diet. But in an age when boiling noodles and adding a microwaved sauce passes for home cooking, it takes some serious kitchen time to deal with big boxes of veggies and fruits that arrive weekly or bi-weekly and include items such as squash, okra, and stinging nettles (just some of TapRoot's more than 40 seasonal offerings).

"Being part of a CSA is a trend, and it's very easy to jump onto a trend," says Bishop, who now has 420 shareholders. "But if we want to maintain memberships in our CSAs, then we need to get a core group of people, communicate to them well, keep them interested in the fact that what we are doing is making change, and get them their good food."

That's why when you go to the CSA section of Bishop's website ([taprootfarms.ca](http://taprootfarms.ca)), the first order of business is to explain "why shareholders are more than shoppers." It's also why Bishop writes both a blog and a newsletter, and has teamed up with a nutritional consultant who has posted a ton of recipes (including 'quinoa pilaf with Taproot nettles' and 'Indian style okra') on the website.

Hsueh also found that her customers – even though she's targeting young, eco-conscious Torontonians – need devoted and ongoing attention.

"Most of my clients are friends, or friends of friends, who kind of want to support me because it's this romantic dream of being able to go off and start a farm," says Hsueh. "Most of them are only just starting to understand that the goal is not me being able to have this romantic Martha Stewart farm, but about addressing global food issues in my own small way."

It's yet another of those contradictions that abound with this type of farming – you need to work extra hard to keep your customers, even the ones who were clamoring to sign up in the first place.

"It's a little bit outside the box," concedes CSA pioneer Dan Wiens. "You have to be someone who enjoys making something from scratch and making things happen with the canvas that's been presented to you. If you enjoy working outside, enjoy agriculture, and doing something a little bit different, it's not a crazy choice at all."

In the end, stereotyping CSAs is a risky proposition. With so many practitioners, all of them simultaneously blazing their own path while continuously sharing and learning from each other, the movement's history is just being written.

As Hsueh put it: "There are a million ways to farm."



The Covert family (Gene, Shelly, daughter Rhya, sons Kaelan and Faolan, and Gene's mother Diana Covert) and scenes from their farm market.

## Consumers want a 'connection' to their food

# It's more than just groceries

Gene Covert – the third market gardener up for this year's Outstanding Young Farmer award – thought long and hard about starting a CSA on his farm near Oliver, B.C.

"There was another farmer doing home deliveries but we have a relatively low population density and so it's pretty hard to sustain," says Covert.

Instead, Gene and wife Shelly went another route, deciding three years ago to open up their 80 acres of organic veggies for U-pick. Although local families have been harvesting tomatoes for canning since Covert's grandfather started the south Okanagan Valley farm in 1959, allowing the general public onto a commercial field crop operation is rather unusual.

It was a move prompted as much by philosophy as commercial reasons.

"We decided that people need to get out and touch their food again," says Covert.

People agreed – and not just the ones big on canning or stocking up the larder. Surprisingly, the farm draws a steady stream of holiday-goers, who are as interested in the experience as the produce.

"On a good afternoon, you might have 15 or 20 families in the fields," he says. "We have a growing core of locals but we get quite a few tourists. They'll come out once – you know, to bring the kids and show them what a farm is like. Then the next thing you know, they keep coming back for the whole week they're here, and telling other people in the campsite or hotel about the farm."

Dan Wiens also discovered that labouring in the field taps into some basic human instinct, although he struggles to define it.

"We've had people who have worked with us on the farm for the entire 19 years," he says. "These folks desire a connection. I was going to say a social connection, but we can be just as close to the people who buy from us at the farmers' market.

"Perhaps a better word is commitment. There are those who want a deeper link, a commitment, to a farm. I think it gives them a sense of being more responsible in their food choices."

"People just love it," adds Covert. "Now that our fields are certified organic, we're getting more families out. It's an outing now, rather than just harvesting stuff."

Covert Farms ([covertfarms.ca](http://covertfarms.ca)) is set up to accommodate visitors. It has an on-farm store, so parking is available and visitors are given maps showing where they can pick in the fields, with tomatoes and berries being the main draw (the farm also produces onions, sweet corn, melons, table grapes and tree fruits).

There are minor problems: The farm's paid harvesting crew (upwards of 35 people at peak times) doesn't like cleaning up the haphazardly harvested U-pick rows, and occasionally Covert has to explain to people that "those green peaches you picked are never going to ripen."

"Although when people do that, they often say, 'I know I can't use them but I want to pay you something because I did pick them,'" Covert says with a laugh.

But, when done right, giving people a chance to explore their inner farmer is good business.

"U-pick is probably about 10 per cent of our sales," says Covert. "And that's pretty significant considering you don't have to pick it, grade it, or package it. It's our lowest-cost form of revenue, so even though we're selling it at 70 to 80 per cent of what we charge in the market, the margins are much higher."

It also creates revenue that otherwise wouldn't exist.

"People are far less choosy when they pick than they are in a grocery store. They'll bring in all kinds of stuff that you typically throw away because it wouldn't make grade."

Wiens has discovered an even more inventive way to use volunteer labour. It's called the Good Food Club ([westbroadway.mb.ca/good-food-club](http://westbroadway.mb.ca/good-food-club)), an initiative that gives residents of a low-income inner-city neighbourhood in Winnipeg a chance to trade 'sweat equity' for fresh wholesome food. A van load of club members visits Wiens' farm weekly during the summer to work in the fields. They keep some of the produce for themselves, and some is sold at a weekly market.

The club takes the equivalent of 10 shares (the farm has another 40 regular CSA shares) and the social good is a key factor for Wiens, who works part of the year for the Mennonite Central Committee and has done aid work in the Third World for a quarter of a century.



"We're thrilled to have people from the inner city, many on social assistance, come out to the farm, but there's a financial benefit for us, too," says Wiens, noting club members also wash and pack vegetables.

"In the first year we did this, I estimated we had an additional \$1,000 worth of veggies to sell at the farmers' market we go to," he says. "Over the course of 20 weeks, that's a lot of additional sales."

It may seem an usual way to generate additional revenue, but in the world of CSAs – where eco-politics, entrepreneurship, and idealism are all part of food production – it all seems to fit.

*The OYF national winners were announced Nov. 26, just after this edition of CFM went to print. Visit [oyfcanada.com](http://oyfcanada.com) to find out the winners or go to [agriwebinar.com](http://agriwebinar.com) to watch their video presentations. There you will also find a video recording of the panel seminar "Growing Your Farm's Value – How To Build Value Chains Around Your Operations."*

## There's more:

on CSA farms at the Canadian Farm Manager section at [farmcentre.com](http://farmcentre.com). You can also post your comments on the website or share your views by emailing [info@cfbmc.com](mailto:info@cfbmc.com)



# The two faces of strategic planning

You could view it as tedious – or get excited about a process that will help you realize your dreams

By Bob Ross

It's always interesting to read stories about people you know – which was the case for me with this edition of the *Canadian Farm Manager* newsletter.

I know Steve Cooper and Josh Oulton from my involvement with the CTEAM (Canadian Total Excellence in Agricultural Management) program at the George Morris Centre.

For me, the big take-away from this edition of *CFM* is the power that a strategic plan brings to a business – which is something I know Steve, Lisa, Josh and Patricia have put a lot of effort into.

The strategic planning process is just as important as the plan itself. The process identifies the attributes that the team players bring to the organization and provides a foundation for good relationships. By establishing good relationships, conflicts that arise in the future can be more easily dealt with. From my experience, there will be hiccups along the way. You need to be a good listener, flexible and have access to resources to assist in developing your strategic plan. Often, involving an outside facilitator to lead the strategic planning process can provide an unbiased perspective and keep the process focused. It's important to identify three or four main strategies, and then create an action plan with expected outcomes and timetables, and to identify who will be accountable for the results. The process requires a lot of thought, time and patience to develop and implement, often taking from 12 to 24 months. It should be a living document that can adapt with changing circumstances.

That's the technical side of things. But when you read *CFM*, I hope you see the other side of the story. When you read about people doing exciting and innovative things on their farms, you can see why creating a strategic plan is a positive experience.

I see this excitement all the time with CTEAM participants after they have gone through the process of developing and implementing their strategic plan. However, my concern is that farm managers like Steve, Lisa, Josh and Patricia are in the minority. A strong strategic plan gives you a competitive advantage and I wish more farmers had one.

So that's my view on this issue of *CFM*. What's yours?

What is your take-away from the stories in this newsletter? What would you like to see in the future – in *CFM*, in our Agriwebinar series, and on our website? What programs or services would you like the Canadian Farm Business Management Council to offer?

I hope you'll share your thoughts and send us an email at [info@cfbmc.com](mailto:info@cfbmc.com). Your email will go to all members of our Board. Let's start the discussion on how we can help those in the farm community take their business management skills to the next level.



Robert L. Ross is president of RossHolm Farms Ltd, a purebred Angus cow-calf and cash crop farm near St. Marys, Ontario. He is a partner of Ceres Forte Inc., a Calgary-based consulting company, an associate of the George Morris Centre, and secretary of CFBMC's board of directors.

# What's new at farmcentre.com?

## New Farmer Profile: New Beginnings for the Farmstead

ALLISTON, ON – Twenty-five-year-old Hollis Murphy was set for a landscape architecture job after graduating from the University of Guelph, planning to work on urban public space design. Instead, with her love of farming, she opted for a management position this past April with her four siblings on the family farm. "All five of us are partners and co-owners of the farm market," she adds. "I am the bakery and retail manager."

She says family support is the number one reason the siblings have been able to accomplish so much the first year.

"What works well for us is that each of us has a different interest and skill set that complement each other. It allows us to diversify and grow as a business."

To read the rest of the story and find tools and other resources for new farmers, visit [farmcentre.com](http://farmcentre.com)



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**Canadian Farm Manager** is published bi-monthly by the Canadian Farm Business Management Council

Editorial by High Bluff Media

Designed by Jason Komoski

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