

Cut Flowers for Community Supported Agriculture Production

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Introduction

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) has been a marketing channel for close to 35 years now. CSA is a direct farm marketing method, which delivers pre-paid shares to members or subscribers over a pre-set number of weeks during the year. In 2016, there were almost 60 CSAs in the state, according to the Kentucky Department of Agriculture. CSA is dependent on community members sharing both the success and risks of farming, along with providing the farmers with working capital before the season starts. Receiving working capital in advance is one of the many benefits of this direct farm-marketing channel. Typically, CSAs offer a wide variety of in-season vegetables, fruit, and/or herbs. Some operations also include meat, eggs, and value-added products such as baked goods or jarred and canned items. Recently, cut flowers have become a popular addition to CSA shares, as well as a single commodity share of their own. Currently, there are 83 cut flower operations in Kentucky, according to the Kentucky Horticulture Council. However, not all 83 operations are participating in the CSA marketing channel. Common cut flower marketing channels, in addition to CSA, are farmers markets, wholesale, and wedding design. Cut flowers are growing in popularity and do not require a large amount of land, so they can be a good opportunity for growers to consider if they are interested.

The Cut Flower CSA Model

The CSA model allows a slice of freedom for the grower. The most common form of a cut flower CSA is the “grower’s choice” arrangement. This model allows the grower to work with the product(s) they have available and not be restricted to certain design or material elements. Having this kind of freedom makes it easier for the grower to design

arrangements and substitute or place flowers as needed during the season. Flexibility in bouquet design during the season is a relief for growers, as it can be hard to predict an entire season due to the variability in weather and outside forces.

Many farmers start out growing a variety of flowers because they are unsure about what will be popular or what will grow well in their operation. Growing a variety, or a mix of flowers, may not be ideal for florists because they require bulk amounts of individual crops, focused on consistent bloom sizes and stem lengths. However, the CSA model allows growers to grow a little bit of everything and use a variety of stem lengths. For example, a grower can arrange longer stems in larger, taller bouquets and shorter stems in smaller, vase arrangements. Large bouquets can come with a higher price value, while shorter stems make the perfect mason jar bouquets. Large and small bouquet sizes can even be used to give customers the opportunity to pick their bouquet size. For example, Bluegrass Blooms offers “regular size” bouquets, which are sized for a quart mason jar, and a “large size” which fits a standard vase or English pitcher. Being able to use all stems of various lengths cuts down on waste and allows for flexibility on the farmer’s end.

The grower’s choice arrangement does take a heavy planning and prediction load. Those interested in starting a CSA for their cut flower operation should take the time to plan their season, while predicting what will be ready for use each week of the season. Planning and prediction are a large part of cultivating a successful CSA. Growers should also think long term, as some cut flowers can take more than one year to establish and bloom. Being aware of the risk community members are taking when subscribing to a CSA and being able to provide a reward above the associated risk is something that should be at the forefront during planning. To be cautious, growers should have a plan in mind in the unfortunate event of their crop not reaching the planned potential. Wind, late or early frost, rain, full sun, pest outbreaks, and other forces of nature can damage or lower the quality of cut flowers; therefore, it is important to provide the necessary protection such as windbreaks, shade cloth, and coverage when necessary. While community members do understand CSA does come with the risks of farming, it is the grower’s job to be transparent about what happens if flowers are not up to par.

Growers can also produce flowers as add-ons to another grower’s CSA operation. This is popular in the state, as it can be a way to piggyback off the customer base of another CSA. It is a way for the grower to begin establishing their cut flower farm, circulate their farm name, and take less of a risk. An example of this is Majestic Greens Farm and Davida’s Flowers in southern Kentucky. Majestic Greens’ CSA offers vegetables and herbs, and the option to add Davida’s Flowers to a customer’s subscription. The CSA even offers \$25 off a full season share price when a consumer adds on the flower share.

Another option, for growers who might already have a vegetable CSA and are looking into adding flowers to the mix, is to have cut flowers as an addition to their existing CSA. This is similar to growers who have egg or meat addition options for their vegetable CSA. An example of this is A Place on Earth CSA Farm. This CSA offers vegetable shares, cut flower shares, and egg shares. The cut flower share could be purchased as a stand-alone share or in conjunction with the farm's vegetable or egg share. Additionally, Old Homeplace Farm provides another example of a diverse CSA offering a flower share, with or without the purchase of their vegetable share. More than likely, there will be overlap between the vegetable and cut flower CSA – which is a good thing, growers are selling more to their original customer base.

Advantages of the CSA Model

There are many advantages of using the CSA model to market cut flowers. CSA is not dependent on the changing taste, specific grading and color standards, or exact scheduling of blooms of floral designers or retail customers. CSA subscribers are not as concerned with the season's trends – they just want beautiful flowers. This allows the grower to focus less on marketing and spend more time growing and producing a premium crop for their loyal customers.

It does take time and outreach to grab a customer base. Those interested in CSA should focus on attracting customers and then concentrate on retaining them. Each year, the goal is to have more returning customers. This allows the grower to have enough steady customers; the grower can put more focus on sales to fewer loyal customers once the base is established. Not having to always resell the product to new customers gives the grower more time to focus on the farming part of their operation.

The upfront payment that comes with the CSA model is a helpful cash flow advantage. While having more than one sales avenue spreads out the grower's risk, growers are not obligated to juggle multiple, different income streams. There is no need to set up at the farmers market, investing time and money into a display, setup, and associated fees if the CSA shares are providing the income the grower needs. A large advantage of CSA is that it creates a season-long, steady market. Growers need not forget about paying themselves or having money to invest back in their business. There is also not a lot of price negotiation or sales pushing in the CSA model. The direct-to-customer model and idea of buying in one bulk payment allows the grower to price subscriptions closer to retail prices.

Disadvantages of the CSA Model

Like any marketing channel, growers should be aware of some disadvantages. CSA is one of the least public ways of selling flowers, though this is changing with social media, which allows farms to create an online presence and engage with their customer base.

The farmers market does have the advantage of providing the grower with more face-to-face time with customers. This means growers might have to work harder to get their farm and share availability out to consumers, as well as educate the public about local flowers. Growers can easily educate consumers face-to-face at the farmer's market and help connect the dots between local food and local flowers – this connection might be harder to make when consumers are not physically in front of the grower.

Additionally, growers should be prepared if their crop is not producing as planned. Forces of nature can damage crops and prevent growers from having enough product for shares. Having a plan in place, such as sourcing from another farm or wholesale, can help mitigate this. On the other hand, harvests often occur more frequently than CSA share delivery, thus refrigerators or coolers may be required for storage and add to production costs.

Growers should also be realistic about the consumer demand for cut flowers. A grower should ask themselves, is there enough demand in my area for a weekly or bi-weekly flower delivery? The demand must be high enough to outweigh costs such as delivery (multiple home deliveries or a central location pick-up point), which are not as challenging or expensive as a single-site farmer's market. It is important to note that consumers might have a higher demand or be willing to pay for a luxury item like cut flowers if they understand why the item is priced a certain way or the value that comes with being part of a CSA. Education can go a long way in agricultural spaces, which might be unfamiliar to some consumers.

Pricing Shares

Pricing cut flower CSA shares can be difficult, especially in the beginning years. However, as the grower becomes more experienced, pricing becomes easier. Growers can network with other growers to see what they are pricing their product at and research retail and wholesale prices to ensure they are not underpricing themselves. Social media is one place to start. Many growers use Facebook groups to discuss management and sales, and use Instagram to market their products. New farmers may find it helpful to scroll through other cut flower grower pages to see how they are pricing their flowers.

Growers have both allocated and unallocated costs. Allocated costs are unique to specific crops, while unallocated costs are more indirect. Pinpointing allocated and unallocated costs is especially important if the grower wishes to offer more than one CSA subscription plan. Allocated costs mainly include plant and production costs, while unallocated costs include things like equipment and its upkeep, labor, land expenses, utilities, marketing expenses, etc. It may be hard to estimate pricing if the grower does not have enough production expense history; however, estimates can be made.

To price a share, the grower should add together the anticipated costs and divide by the number of shares they are confident in selling. This gives the grower an idea of the amount each share should be priced at to cover their anticipated costs. It is a good idea to charge more than the minimum amount, so there is cash to put back into the business and cash to make up for costs that might not have been anticipated at first. If a grower is unsure of costs, there are budgets available to assist in pricing allocated and unallocated costs. In the References Section, links are provided to Utah State University's production budget for snapdragons, grown in an open field and high tunnel system.

A unique pricing element of cut flowers is the value of design. Each bouquet, whether it is sold through CSA or at the farmer's market, has an element of design that the grower holds. The value of design is the value of the grower's skill to arrange a bouquet. A good rule of thumb is to value design at 20% of the cost of the bouquet. Then, price the bouquet with this percentage in mind. For example, a \$20 bouquet should consist of 20% value of design and 80% inputs (flowers, wrapping, etc.); this would be \$4 and \$16, respectively. Just as a grower should not forget to pay themselves or invest back into their farm, a grower should not forget that their artistic ability has a monetary value.

Below are example prices from various cut flower CSAs across the state – see Table 2. It is easy to observe how the same season length CSA can vary in price. As seen below, the 4-week seasons come in at different price points; however, these price point differences are likely attributed to the CSA's location (urban vs. rural), what the grower considers the share's value to be, the value of design, the grower's inputs, the variety and amount of seeds and plants purchased, etc. These characteristics can all be used to help growers find their season's price point. It is apparent that CSA prices can vary widely, but keep in mind the idea to keep the price of a CSA competitive enough to be profitable but not too pricy that it scares away consumers. Additionally, growers should always remember their share price must cover growing and operating costs – or they will not make a profit or have money to invest back into the business.

Table 1: Cut Flower CSA Share Prices from Selected KY Farms 2021

Season Length	Price per Share
2 weeks	\$40 – optional \$5 delivery fee*
4 weeks	\$70 – optional \$15 delivery fee*
4 weeks	\$80 – optional \$15 delivery fee*
4 weeks	\$120 – delivery included
Notes	*Delivery fees are the cost of delivery across the entire season, not cost per-week.

Specialization

In vegetable production, it is ideal to offer a full-season CSA subscription, typically lasting from late May to September. This allows growers to capture their customer base for the entire season. However, shorter CSA subscription options are available for cut flower growers. It is possible to offer season-based subscriptions, such as a spring or summer CSA share. Breaking the CSA shares into seasons may be helpful for those just starting out, as it allows some downtime from the intensity of growing, harvesting, and arranging weekly or bi-weekly shares. The shorter CSA season often comes with a lower consumer cost, which can be appealing to new customers who are hesitant to make a large monetary investment, especially for a luxury item. For example, a spring CSA share would run for about four weeks and feature the highlights of the season – such as tulips, peonies, anemones, and stock. Again, shorter seasons are ideal for consumers who do not wish to commit to a full season, as flowers are a luxury good. These shorter and more specific seasons can be done in conjunction with a regular, full-length CSA season. However, they may take some additional time to plan and market to customers. Having to resell each shorter season is a disadvantage compared to a full-length season vegetable share. Growers should account for time spent promoting and planning. However, having multiple options for consumers to choose from allows the consumer to find a part of the grower's CSA subscription that works best for them.

Growers can also target key holiday markets. Key Holiday markets during the growing season are Mother's Day, Memorial Day, the Fourth of July, Labor Day, and back-to-school. An option is to promote the opportunity for extra flowers during key holidays as a way of focusing more sales with the current customer base. This builds sales on existing customers instead of reaching for new ones. Growers may grow to capture customers who subscribe for multiple seasons in a year. This allows the customer to see the beauty of seasonal changes, which can promote retention. Many consumers find excitement in seeing the red, white, and blue/purple flowers of July turn into the reds, yellows, and oranges of fall.

A farm may also specialize in its customer base. While most CSA operations market to individual community members, a cut flower CSA can also market to restaurants or places of business. This would be more of a vase refill service and would provide the place of business with more than just one share's worth of flowers. This "farm to vase" idea closely follows the popular idea of "farm to table." A great, local example is Agape Fields in Nicholasville, Kentucky. In addition to a bouquet subscription, Agape Fields offers a bucket subscription. The bucket subscription includes 30+ stems for the buyer to arrange, which creates an economical way for restaurants and other small businesses to display seasonal flowers. This bucket subscription could also be used by a couple of friends who are interested in a weekly bouquet-making gathering. Larger

commitments like restaurant vase refills remind the grower how important it is to be aware of having enough product for each of the weekly or bi-weekly shares. While finding ways to specialize a cut flower operation can aid in reaching a large enough customer base to be profitable, a grower must also have enough product for the customer base.

Seasonality

Similar to vegetable CSA operations, cut flower CSAs experience seasonality. There are certain flowers in season at different times of the year. Being able to plan shares and arrangements around these periods is an important part of the CSA season and share preparation. It is ideal to plan staggered plantings of annuals, use cultivars from different maturity groups, perennials, bulbs, and foliage to yield cut flowers for the entirety of the season. A consumer’s experience is a big factor in subscribing to a CSA year after year. Having a hearty and well-put-together bouquet of flowers each week for subscribers is vital to CSA success.

Table 2: What’s in Bloom Each Season?

Spring	Summer	Fall
Allium, Daffodil, Foxglove, Larkspur, Lily, Peony, Ranunculus, Shasta Daisy, Snapdragon, Stock, Tulip	Ageratum, Basil, Calla Lily, Celosia, Coneflower, Dahlia, Hydrangea, Lavender~ Sunflower, Veronica, Zinnia.	Amaranthus, Asters, Basil, Dahlia, Gerbera Daisy, Gomphrena, Gracillimus, Kale, Marigold, Rudbeckia, Snapdragon.



Season Extension

Producing on the edges of the season allows for higher price points from early or late market demand. High tunnels or other cold frames are an effective way to extend the season into both the fall and early spring months. High tunnels come with a bit of an investment, but they can start and end the growing season four to six weeks before and after normal outdoor growing dates. Extending in the fall can be a challenge for taller or flowering plants. Flowering plants can be easily damaged by an overnight frost, while tall plants cannot make use of ground heat. However, spring extension allows the grower to advance the plant when it is small and has no blooms. Low tunnels are not suitable for all types of cut flowers. For example, dahlias and sunflowers may be too tall for a low tunnel. For other crops, low tunnels can provide shade to promote longer stems, soil warming for bulbed crops, and can be more accessible to those who do not have high tunnels.

Growers can use greenhouses to grow cut flowers; however, climate-controlled environments are more expensive to construct. Cultivating flowers in greenhouses is not as cost effective as high tunnels or other cold frames because of the higher cost per square foot of production area. However, it is not uncommon to start cut flowers in a greenhouse or controlled environment if the grower already has access to it.

The Influence of Social Media

Social media is used for education and sales in the cut flower industry. Growers use social media to price their flowers, ask questions about cultivar selection and management, and market their farm and products. Media outlets, such as Instagram and Facebook, allow growers to show their subscribers what the farm is up to, promote themselves to new and existing customers, and educate consumers on what flowers are in season. Some cut-flower CSAs use Pinterest boards to give their customers an idea of what flowers to expect throughout the season. Flowers are unique because they are photogenic, which makes them a perfect tool for social media. Growers should use social media tools to promote their operation because it is an easy way to grab consumer's attention.

Succeeding with CSA

Succeeding with a cut flower CSA is possible with time, inputs, and a realistic mindset. Growers should evaluate the need for a CSA in their area and the costs associated with operating a CSA before any large investment is made. Running a CSA takes time, so growers should be prepared to commit to this operation. Growers should also set clear

expectations for their members with a contract or membership agreement. Information on what should be included in a CSA membership agreement can be found in the “Understanding a Community Supported Agriculture Agreement” selected resource. Customer retention is an important aspect of CSA – keeping customers happy is paramount. Growers interested in CSA should have the end goal of keeping their customers happy and returning year after year. Create ways for the consumer to connect with the farm, such as a farm tour or an on-farm event where they could pick their own flowers (under supervision). Providing incentives for members, such as photo-shoot days in the flower field, can be a fun way to get consumers involved and keep retention high. There is always some turnover with a CSA, so marketing and retention must be a continuous effort.

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