



localfoodworks



Growing with Grace vegetable bag delivery scheme

A small food co-operative growing organic vegetables has developed innovative ways of supplying a local market with an organic shop and a delivery service.

This case-study focuses on the community-minded strategies and day-to-day running of *Growing with Grace's* award-winning vegetable bag delivery scheme.

Introduction

Growing with Grace is a social enterprise¹ run as a small organic food co-operative based in the village of Clapham on the edge of the Yorkshire Dales National Park. The business has three interdependent components: a greenhouse vegetable growing operation covering two acres (0.9 hectares), an organic shop, and a year-round bag-delivery scheme.

History

The co-operative was formed in November 2000 by a group of 5 local people (mainly Quakers) with a vision of an alternative way of business based on sustainability, equitable employment, workplace spirituality and fair-trade. One of the founder members, Neil, had worked for the couple who originally turned t

¹ Social enterprises are "competitive businesses, owned and trading for a social purpose. They seek to succeed as businesses by establishing a market share and making a profit. Social enterprises combine the need to be successful businesses with social aims. They emphasise the long-term benefits for employees, consumers and the community." British Bankers Association.

"Our values are honesty, truth, integrity, harmony, equality and peace. One way you can see that is how we try to be honest with each other, with our suppliers and with our customers"

Rachel Phillips, co-op member

he former flower growing greenhouses into an organic nursery. When the couple wanted to sell, the co-op was formed to buy it. Organic status was achieved in February 2001 – they are certified by the Soil Association to produce and pack organic produce. The delivery business was taken over as a going concern and the number of bags which they put together each week has increased from 150 to 400 by consolidating in the original delivery areas.

The directors come from a wide variety of different backgrounds including workers' co-operatives, education, farming, catering, retailing, speech and language therapy, and business. Sue Stark believes that this variety is a source of their strength as they all bring different skills, experience and perspectives to the organisation.

Structure

A co-operative structure was chosen as it reflected the Quaker principles of sustainability and equitable employment. As a co-operative, the business is jointly owned, decision-making is shared, and salaries are based on need within a structure of equal pay. There are now 6 directors and 10 part-time staff.

Objective and aims

Growing with Grace is committed to providing their customers with the very best service in the delivery of organic fruit and vegetables. Its aims are:

- To provide local people with high quality, reasonably priced local food grown using sustainable agricultural practices.
- To source as much local produce as possible to supplement their own produce from their greenhouses. They also include imported produce in order to offer variety.
- To stock their shop with a wide range of organic food products including fresh vegetables and locally produced milk, cheese, eggs and bread. A lot of dry produce is bought in bulk from SUMA Wholefoods to cut down on packaging and it is sold loose in order to reduce costs.
- To promote the sale of fairly traded imported products to support farmers in developing countries.

The bag scheme

The bag scheme services the areas of Craven, Ribblesdale, North Lancashire and the Lune Valley – a radius of about twenty-five miles.

A range of vegetable, salad and fruit bags are delivered weekly and often include recipe sheets, storing suggestions and newsletters. The core range includes:

- Three vegetable bags priced at £7, £10 and £13.50, which always contain potatoes, onions, carrots, mushrooms and seasonal produce;
- A salad bag priced at £5;
- Three fruit bags priced at £5, £7 and £11.50, which contain apples, bananas and seasonal fruit.

They try to offer a balance of root, green and salad vegetables and offer a degree of flexibility to accommodate customers' tastes. For example, people with allergies to certain foods or people who grow some of their own vegetables may want to be selective about the products they receive. They allow up to 3 changes for which they make a small service charge.

Local organic milk and eggs can be added to the bag order.

"The veg bags are great because busy people can just have their shopping done for them. If they are at work we can just deliver to sheds and when they come home they find a bag of goodies"
Sue Stark, co-op member

Contents of a typical £10 Bag
Mid-November:

Potatoes	1 kg
Carrots	400g
Onions	200g
Red onions	200g
Parsnips	350g
Cabbage	1
Courgettes	300g
Red pepper	1
Mushrooms	160g
Tomatoes	250g
Aubergine	1
Fennel	1
Bramley apples	450g

Contents of a typical £10 Bag
Mid-July:

Potatoes	1 kg
Carrots	400g
Onions	400g
Sunburst Squash	1
Green pepper	1
Lettuce	1
Tomatoes	250g
Mushrooms	160g
Runner beans	300g
Kohlrabi	1
Cucumber	1

Also on offer is a Choice Bag for customers who prefer to choose the contents of their bag. Due to the additional administration involved, a £15 minimum order is imposed and orders are requested at least two days in advance of delivery.

Payment is made in cash or by cheque on delivery. If the customer will not be in when delivery is made, payment must be made in advance, either on line, by a cheque or standing order for 4 weeks in advance. Home-delivery is made on a specific day each week, depending on where the customer lives, and takes place just twenty-four hours after the produce is picked. Customers are encouraged to set up a standing order to reduce administration. They can also opt for a fortnightly or one-off delivery and some customers alternate bags each week, perhaps taking a vegetable bag one week and a salad bag the following week. In response to this customer demand, *Growing with Grace* has just launched a Combination Bag, priced £10, which comprises a small amount of a wide variety of products.

Whenever possible vegetables grown at their own nursery are used in the bags. However, in order to provide a wide variety of produce throughout the year, the bags are supplemented with produce from other local growers and wholesale suppliers. Tender crops are grown at the nursery on an eight year rotation and include salad leaves, lettuces, aubergines, peppers, courgettes, cucumbers, beans and peas, squashes, brassicas, sweetcorn and lots of herbs. The proportions of own produce to bought-in vary greatly throughout the year but is roughly 20% home-grown, 20% bought in from local producers, 30% UK grown and 30% imported. The order of priority where they source from is always local, then UK, then imported.

The extended growing season provided by the greenhouses gives a unique opportunity to fill the “hungry gap” in May and June when the previous year’s crops have been used, but the current year’s crops are generally not yet ready to be harvested.

The packing operation

The packing operation takes place in a large shed on site. The local environmental health officer assisted in the design of the layout and provided lots of useful advice on matters such as health and safety requirements. He is now also assisting them with making an application for a grant to upgrade the shed for which they are investigating environmentally friendly cool storage methods.

Two full-day and one half-day packers come in on Tuesdays and two half-day packers on Wednesdays. One of the packers doubles up as a driver, which Sue recommends as an efficient use of labour. In addition to the packers and drivers, one of the directors is responsible for the organisation of the bag delivery service and she also has 8 hours per week of administration assistance for invoicing. Trading standards provided information on weights and measures, although much of the packing is done using the eye, against a weighed amount.

Funding and expenditure

The land is rented from a local landowner and a loan was secured from Triodos Bank to buy the 5 glasshouses and 2 polytunnels. These were in great need of repair to make them work effectively and also for insurance purposes. One delivery van is rented and the other van used for deliveries is owned by its driver, who is paid for the use of it.

Sales

“Every bag I deliver is one less trip to the supermarket”
Gill Barran, driver for the delivery scheme

Many of their 250 customers take more than one bag on a regular basis, making the total number of bags packed and delivered each week around 400, which they feel is a comfortable level for them at the moment. Turnover for the delivery scheme for last year was £95,000.

All their own produce is put into the delivery scheme and the shop, and occasionally they sell wholesale. They have even been known to give every customer in the shop a free marrow, when the courgettes have had a growth spurt!

Marketing

Growing with Grace tries as much as possible to gain publicity without incurring expense. For example, they always contact the local media when they have some news.

“When we get our veg bag, it’s like opening Christmas presents – lots of lovely surprises”
Growing with Grace customer

They also have a website (www.growingwithgrace.co.uk), which is very comprehensive and a good way of keeping in touch with the customers as well as publicising the nursery.

Customers are encouraged to act as collection points. If the collection point serves four or more other customers, the collection point customer receives a free bag every week. If a customer recommends a friend to try the scheme, the friend receives a free introductory bag.

Special events are occasionally held on site and the growers are always pleased to show customers around their giant oil-heated greenhouses that are also home to frogs, wagtails and slug-eating hedgehogs.

Local food links

Local post office scheme

Much success has been enjoyed with a multi-drop initiative in partnership with local post offices, which not only saves on food delivery miles but also supports local small businesses and gets the local community more involved. The scheme impressed the judges of *The Organic Food Awards 2002* who made *Growing with Grace* joint winners in the *Local Food Initiative* category. The local post office scheme has so far attracted eleven post offices in the region. A combined total of sixty to seventy bags is delivered each week to the network. The post offices make a small profit by buying the bags at a ten per cent discount, which rises to fifteen per cent when the delivery reaches more than five bags per week. The customers pay the post office directly and the post office pays the delivery driver weekly. The members of the scheme receive marketing materials, such as leaflets and posters to help them promote the service. The idea for using post offices came from a customer who ran one himself. The fact that the boxes come in and go out the same day means that no additional storage is required and has the added benefit of attracting additional customer traffic through the post office.

Local retailers

A small network of local retail outlets also acts as collection and payment points for the weekly vegetable, salad and fruit bags.

Hotels and restaurants

The nursery also supplies a few local hotels and restaurants.

Local council

A community composting scheme in partnership with Craven District Council is underway. The compost created provides the soil with nutrients and relieves local people and parks of garden waste, and completes the local food cycle. The local council has provided brown wheelie bins to the majority of local homes and the “green” waste is collected on a fortnightly basis. The waste is then taken to the co-operative where it is shredded. Using a windrow system, a specialised turner distributes the heat evenly and the compost is held at a constant temperature that breaks down the compost quickly and evenly. This scheme was totally grant funded by SEED (Social, Economic and Development Programme), ERDF (European Regional Development Fund) and The Yorkshire Dales Millennium Trust.

Schools

Links exist with the local village school, which began with a request from the school to provide fruit for playtime snacks. The school uses *Growing with Grace* as a resource for a variety of projects across the curriculum. For example, in 2002, the school planted and cultivated a specially designed garden in the glasshouses. In 2003 the school used the site as part of their project on water.

Plans for the future

Growing with Grace is finding that more and more people are wanting choice and so they are looking at further ways of responding to this. For example, they are looking to extend their delivery service to other foods. They have applied for a grant with the help of the local authority. The results of a feasibility study indicated the need for additional office space to cope with the extra administration work, as well as additional packing space and storage.

During the summer when many customers are on holidays and also have home-grown produce, *Growing with Grace* are looking to the tourist industry for customers for their produce. For example, they are considering supplying holiday cottages with a welcome pack and are discussing this with other local food suppliers. This would, of course, need additional funding for marketing and improved packing facilities.

As a logical extension to their existing network of local post offices and retail outlets, they are also considering using rural pubs as collection points.

They are investigating the use of milk rounds as an additional delivery method.

Hints and tips

Sue Stark’s tips for anyone wanting to start a veg box/bag delivery scheme are:

- Communication with customers is key, particularly as face to face contact is not established very often.
- Be extremely systematic and organised and put good systems into place with good internal communications.

Information

- **How to set up an organic box scheme**, Local Food Works briefing sheet
- **Setting up an organic box scheme**, Soil Association, technical guide £4.00
- **The Organic Directory: A Directory of Farm Shops, Box Schemes and Retailers**, Soil Association and Green Books, 2000, £4.95 or accessible for free on the Soil Association website.
- **Farm Management Handbook 2002/2003** University of Wales, Aberystwyth Organic Advisory Service (EFRC), £12.00, T: 01970 622248
E: organic@aber.ac.uk, W: www.organic.aber.ac.uk
- **Marketing Information for Organic Growers (Horticultural Crops)**, Soil Association Fact Sheet £5.00, T: 0117 914 2400
- **The Boxing Clever Cookbook**
by J Jones & J Wilmot, ISBN: -09543891-0-7, 187pp, £9.99 plus £2.50 p&p
A wonderful new cookbook for customers of box schemes and one that box scheme operators may like to promote to their customers. It contains very useful information about box schemes, CSA, storage of vegetables, monthly farming news and seasonal recipes.
Available from J&J Publishing
T: 01309 672 001
E: jj@theboxingclevercookbook.co.uk
W: www.theboxingclevercookbook.co.uk
- **Local Food for Local People: Practical Guide to Developing Sustainable Local Food Economies**, Soil Association, 1998, £10.00
- **Cultivating Communities**: A Soil Association project that supports the development of novel arrangements between farmers and those that eat the food they produce based upon a relationship of mutual support - known as community supported agriculture. These initiatives are an opportunity for everyone to play a part in the transition towards more sustainable local food systems. W: www.cuco.org.uk, T: 0117 987 4608, E: csa@cuco.org.uk
- **A Share in the Harvest**, feasibility study and action manual on community supported agriculture are both available from Soil Association.
- **Funding sources for local food initiatives**, Local Food Works briefing sheet.
- **SUMA Wholefoods**, www.suma.co.uk, Tel: 0845 458 2291

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