

Farm Profile

Heart and Soil CSA (<http://heartandsoil.ca/>)

“I’ve tried to not farm, but I can’t not do it,” says Laura van Hatten-Contant, owner of Heart and Soil CSA in Woodville, Kings County. “I guess it’s in my blood.”



Laura is the daughter of Dutch immigrants who grew up on a dairy farm in Woodville. She studied Animal Science at the Nova Scotia Agricultural College for two years before transferring to Iowa's Dordt College where she finished her degree with a strong emphasis on sustainable agriculture.

Laura always planned to farm with her dad but as milk quota prices escalated, he was reluctant to see his daughter enter such a high debt to capital ratio commodity. In 1998, he sold his cows, quota, and equipment, but kept the land, house, and buildings. In the meantime, Laura married Michael Contant, a house builder from British Columbia. Together, they lived and traveled in a variety of places before returning to Laura's roots in Nova Scotia to start a family.

Laura was drawn back to farming. She had access to her parents' farmland but student loans to pay and a baby, so she started a market garden – something she could do with limited time and money. Five years ago, Laura was a latecomer to the Valley farmers' market scene. She found herself competing with more established market gardeners and recognized the need to do something different. She decided to try a CSA.

CSA stands for Community Shared Agriculture, a production and marketing model in which producers provide a set amount of food once a week for a fixed number of weeks. Price is determined and paid in advance before the season starts. This offers the consumer a share in the farm, a stronger connection to the person producing their food, and a delivery box full of seasonally available items each week. It offers the producer a guaranteed market, a fair price for their products, and some upfront capital.

Laura learned about CSAs during her time in the US, first in her coursework at Dordt College, then when she interned on a goat farm in Wisconsin. Originally, this farm sold goat's milk and goat's milk soap but in order to utilize one of the by-products - manure - the farm branched out into market gardening. What began as small vegetable planting expanded to a 50-member CSA. Laura saw the potential of the CSA model in Nova Scotia if she ever returned home, but when she asked people back home about it, their reaction was mixed.

Nevertheless, she decided to give it a try. “I was very surprised at how interested people were,” Laura says about her initial CSA sign-up sheet. “I filled up to 25 members very quickly and spent the rest of the summer educating many people at my market stand what a CSA was.” Members loved the look of the fresh food in their baskets – some were so excited they took pictures! She ended up selling most of her produce through her CSA rather than the farmers' market.

Despite her previous experience in Wisconsin, running the CSA herself has been a big learning experience. Initially, Laura offered free home delivery and accommodated every request which taught her two key things: set limits on what you can and can't do, and plan crops to consistently keep a fresh and steady supply for 16-20 weeks.

Despite the learning curve, Laura considered the first year a success and decided to build on the momentum. With two children and increased competition with other CSAs, Laura briefly considered taking a break until her children were older. Determined to succeed, Laura continued running her CSA. In the past four years, she's welcomed a third child, maintained her member numbers, and learned how to run a business while balancing a (growing) family life!

Initially, Laura had worries about competition from the new CSAs. While she did lose a few members who wanted a 52-week share, the overall market for CSAs has grown. The work of Taproot Farms, in particular, to mainstream the CSA concept has made it easier for Laura. She no longer has to educate as many consumers about the CSA concept. While she currently can't offer a year-round share, she does offer two kinds of boxes, "Basic" and "Beyond Basic". The Basic box is for people who prefer more traditional types of vegetables. The Beyond Basic box caters to more adventurous eaters and satisfies Laura's own need to grow a greater variety of interesting crops.

For this year, Laura has switched to a Fall CSA, allowing her to spread out the production and marketing work. She finds the CSA is a good fit for her young family. She has traded vegetables for child care at a local day care and has used the day care as a drop off site for CSA shares, as several other families at that day care have become her customers. She also likes the flexibility of working for herself, especially setting her own hours and working while the kids are sleeping. "I wouldn't want any other job while my kids are young," Laura says.

And once the kids are older? Laura has a passion for working with animals and would like to add some livestock. She's currently using only one acre of her parents' land and would like to be able to get more of it in production. She still struggles with gauging what the market wants and has doubts about her farmer identity, having come from a big dairy farm and now farming only an acre of vegetables. Between her work on the farm and her family, time is limited for attending meetings and workshops. In turn, she feels a bit isolated from the broader farm community.

One thing is certain, Laura is committed to making her farm a success. Laura loves the connection it gives her to the land and the people in her community. She enjoys being outside and knowing people are eating well because of something she grew for them. As her children grow and she hones her business and marketing skills, the farm will evolve and expand, strengthening Laura's role in her local community.