The Beyer family in Winnebago, Ill., has figured out a way to eliminate some of the labor-intensive work involved with operating a Community-Supported Agriculture business, where veggies are picked and delivered to customers. They’ve started a subscription U-pick garden. In 2011, they had 60 subscribers harvesting produce from between 5 and 6 acres.

“We don’t have to pick, clean or market,” says Jill Beyer, who owns Harrison Market Gardens with her husband, Bill, and their son, Ben. The family decided to give the idea a try when they had a 5-acre hay field available after their horses died. They had never farmed, but had always raised a big garden.

“The first time customers come, we train them how to pick,” Beyer says. For example, pickers learn to remove the outer leaves of lettuce and other greens so that the center continues to produce more leaves.

Each week, subscribers receive a list of what produce is available and where it’s located in the garden’s numbered rows. Based on that amount of produce available, the Beyers suggest each subscriber’s “fair share” such as a dozen carrots, a couple of cabbages, and so on. After picking, subscribers can use the Beyers’ wash station to clean off the vegetables before taking them home.

Some of the vegetables are picked up in the farm’s packing shed.

“Do we do a bit of pre-picking,” Beyer says with all the vine crops, potatoes and mature onions. It eliminates the problem of pickers stepping on plants and picking produce too early.

Subscribers have a couple of options: $475 for a weekly visit for about 25 weeks or $325 for biweekly visits. A couple of families work 4 hours a week for their subscription fee. Some pay the subscription and volunteer to work because they enjoy it.

Beyer appreciates that customers call it “their farm,” and she thinks more entrepreneurs should give it a try.

She offers a few tips:

- It’s important to be located near a large population area. Most of the Beyers’ customers live within 12 miles.
- Start small, and get feedback about what to grow. Each year the Beyers try a couple of novelty crops, but drop them if customers don’t care for them. Asparagus, strawberries and sweet corn seem to be the most popular produce. Edamame (edible soybeans) are also growing in popularity.
- Get subscriptions early. The Beyers contact former customers in February and ask for the first payment and post dated checks for June and July, which helps cover costs and simplifies bookkeeping.
- Set up a website. The Beyers have their own online ordering system, which has been great for attracting new business.
- Stay focused on agriculture and not entertainment to avoid the need for extra insurance. The Beyer’s agent advised them not to even add a slide or swing.

“We just think it’s a marvelous way of getting families into the country,” Beyer says. “It’s a worthwhile venue to come to even though we are not an entertainment venue.”

She says she can’t think of any disadvantages, and that it’s a good alternative to farmer’s markets. When there is excess produce, the Beyers donate it to the local food pantry. In addition to the U-pick operation, they are looking at ways of selling to restaurants and developing other markets so that Ben can make it his full-time job.

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