



Members' Experiments Results

Thumbs Up for Organic Boxes

Organic box schemes have become firmly established as a way for consumers to get fresh, locally produced, nutritious vegetables throughout the year. HDRA's 'Organic Box Scheme Watch' – a members' experiment for 2005, *The Organic Way* issue 178 – asked members to report on their experiences with, and to comment on, box schemes.



The 'Organic Box Scheme Watch' survey had two main objectives. First, to get a better understanding of why Garden Organic members subscribe to organic box schemes and what they expect of them, and, second, to determine the range, quality, and price of organic vegetables in box schemes. To those who volunteered, we sent out a questionnaire, asking why they subscribed to a box scheme and asking them to describe their box scheme. As part of this survey, we also attempted to find out how committed they were to box schemes by gauging how tolerant they were to price increases or occasional problems.

In the final part of the survey, we asked for a record of the contents of boxes received in May and September. At the same time we asked them to find out if the same produce was available in a local supermarket and at what price.

Of the 106 members who applied to participate in this survey, 65 of them returned completed survey forms.

Box scheme subscribers

The 2005 survey showed that participants depended on their 'organic box' to supply, on average, 77% of their

vegetables. However, 75% also grew their own vegetables. The average spend on vegetables per week was £12.40. Although most spent between £6-£10 per week, some spent considerably more than this, pulling the average up. The balance of vegetables was purchased by and large from supermarkets.

Why buy a box?

The three most common reasons participants gave for starting to order an organic box were 1) to support the local economy, 2) to reduce food miles, and 3) to have a supply of fresh organic vegetables. These, along with the 'convenience of having vegetables delivered', were also major motivational factors for continuing to receive a box. There was a general consensus that supermarkets are 'faceless', and many subscribers appreciated the 'face to face' approach of box schemes. Some box schemes, for example, included newsletters and cooking suggestions for unusual vegetables. These factors gave the impression that box schemes are a friendlier, more sociable way of ordering and receiving organic vegetables.

The box schemes

Most people heard about the box scheme to which they subscribe by word of mouth (38%), although letterbox drops were also important (19%). Slightly over half of the box schemes (56%) were based on a farm, which, although representing more than half the boxes, is perhaps less than we had expected. Members' views on this topic varied; some stated that they would not order from a scheme that wasn't farm based, while others did not mind.

Most members (77%) received their box on a weekly basis and the remainder (32%) fortnightly. The average length of time that people had remained signed up to a box scheme was 3.5 years, although this ranged



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Mixed organic vegetable crops at Radford Mill, near Bristol



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Cotesbach Organic Garden, which produces organic vegetables for a box scheme

between one and 12 years. Most people ordered a box all year round, although others took one for as few as 12 weeks. Not surprisingly, members who also grow their own vegetables took a box for less time (42 weeks on average) than those not growing their own (47 weeks). Most members ordered by telephone (44%) or had a standing order (20%).

May		September	
Vegetable	% Boxes	Vegetable	% Boxes
Carrots	84	Potatoes	75
Potatoes	75	Onions	71
Onions	72	Carrots	69
Lettuce	51	Tomatoes	48
Courgette	45	Broccoli	43
Tomatoes	40	Cabbage	35
Mushrooms	40	Courgette	32
Pepper	31	Lettuce	31
Cucumber	31	Pepper	29
Broccoli	29	Leek	28
Cabbage	26	Chard	12
Cauliflower	25	Beans	12
Leek	19	Squash	12
Spinach	15	Aubergine	11
Beetroot	12	Beetroot	11

Table 1: Fifteen most common items in boxes in May and Sept 2005

Value	Excellent	Good	Ok	Poor
Price	26	49	23	2
Quality	41	48	11	0
Range	30	51	19	0
Taste	62	35	3	0
Flexibility	33	24	35	8

Table 2: Box value ratings (%)

It's not all vegetables

As expected, almost every member (97%) received vegetables in their box and half (51%) also received fruit. A few also had eggs (18%) and dairy products (8%) but no one bought meat this way. Most schemes allow a choice of box size (92%) and some a choice of vegetables (45%) and/or other products (60%).

The average spend on a box was £10.64, but with a large range between £4.50 and £26.95. There was an average of 10 items in a box, with a wide range of produce on offer. Seventy-two different types of fruit or vegetable were recorded in boxes in May, and 97 in September! Table 1 shows the 15 most common vegetable items in May and September. A majority (76%) of box customers felt that they did not need more variety from their current box, which seems to indicate that most are satisfied with the level of variety and choice in boxes.

The value of box schemes

Most members rated their boxes highly for the taste of the produce (Table 2). Price, quality, and range of produce were slightly less well rated and flexibility was the area of least satisfaction with box schemes. A sensibility analysis (see 'Extra sensitivity graph') assessed how committed members were to their box scheme. A total of 80% indicated that they would continue to take a box if the price rose by 20%, but this dropped to 7% once the price rose by 40%.

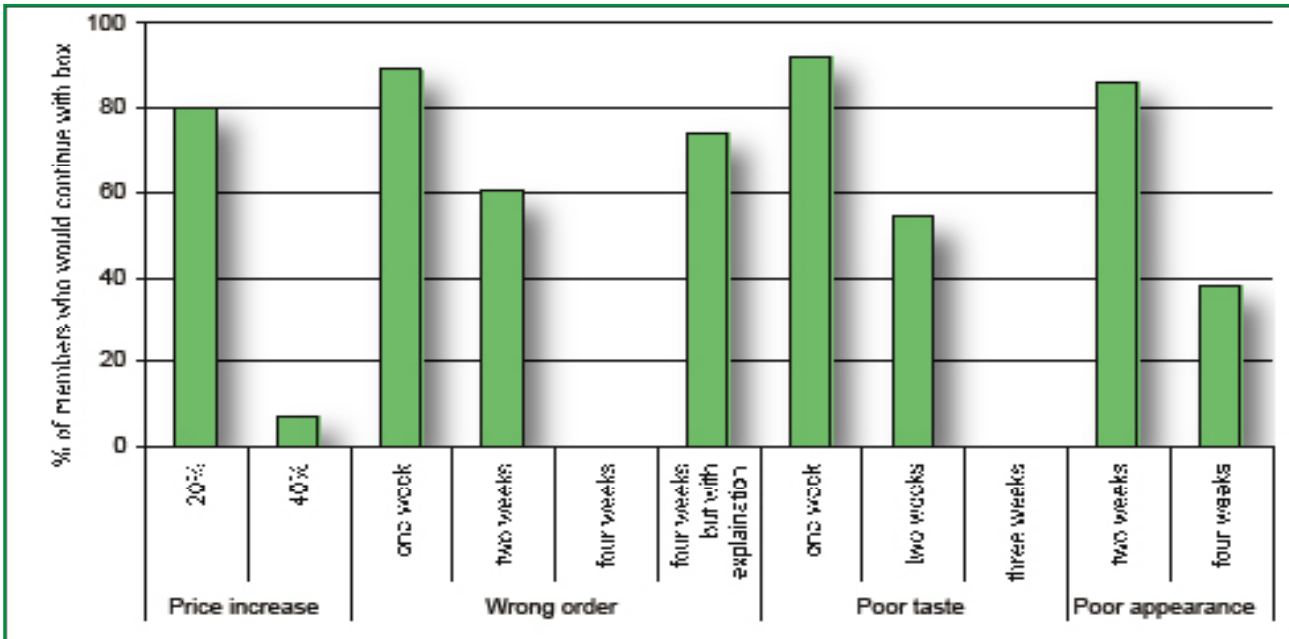
This indicates to us that members are committed to box schemes and that although price is important, it is not an overwhelming motivation for taking a box. In support of this, most members would continue taking a box if the order were wrong on one week (89%) or even 2 consecutive weeks (60%) but would discontinue if the order were wrong for 4 consecutive weeks without explanation. Interestingly, 74% would continue with the box even after 4 weeks as long as the reasons were explained to them.

The sensitivity analysis highlighted the importance of taste. Most members (92%) would continue if the produce in the box tasted poor in one week but this drops to 54% if flavour were poor in 2 consecutive weeks and none would continue if this extended to 3 weeks. Some people commented that if the produce they received tasted poor for a week or two they would ring up and question the organisers as to what was wrong. As long as the taste is good, people, it seems, are not that interested in looks, with 86% saying they would continue if looks were poor in 2 consecutive weeks. However, this drops to 38% if looks remained poor over 4 weeks.



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An organic vegetable box from Cotesbach Organic Garden



A deeper analysis of the price of boxes confirms the observation that price is not the only motivation for taking a box. The average cost of an organic box in this survey was £10.46.

As we asked members to collect data on how much similar organic produce was priced in local supermarkets at the same time as they recorded the contents of their boxes, we were able to put together a 'theoretical' box of the average quantity of the 10 most common items received in boxes.

This 'theoretical box' would have cost, on average, £9.55 in the supermarket in May and £10.42 in September. Allowing for the fact that some of the organic vegetables received in boxes were reported as not being available in supermarkets in September and May and the fact that the range of products in boxes was generally wider than those reported from supermarkets, the actual cost of the produce in the box schemes and in the supermarkets can be taken to be the same.



Organic vegetable boxes from Woodlands Organic Farm, Lincolnshire

Box schemes: pros and cons

There were few complaints about organic box schemes. Some members felt that not all box scheme organisers are transparent enough about where they source their vegetables. Some members believe some produce has a high number of food miles and this is obvious when, for instance, boxes contain mangos or bananas, as some did.

Paradoxically, the seasonality of box schemes means that the contents can also become repetitive for some, and this might have led to the feeling that flexibility seems to be a problem with some schemes. For instance, many people noted that they sometimes received an excess of certain vegetables, which they do not like, such as chard, and that they found it difficult to change what they received in these circumstances.

The overwhelming majority of respondents in this survey were very satisfied with their boxes. In stating why they will continue to buy their organic produce in this way, most of the respondents to this survey highlighted that they were committed because they were pleased with the quality of the produce and valued a local source of seasonal organic vegetables. Many mentioned the fact that fresh local vegetables were tastier and that they valued the variability in the box, a variability that leads them to discover fruit and vegetables they might not otherwise try. Many also mentioned that they liked the convenience of having fresh vegetables delivered.

The overwhelming majority of respondents indicated that they plan to continue taking a box in the foreseeable future. We would suggest that if you haven't already, you take the step of hunting out and subscribing to a local box scheme.

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Go to www.whyorganic.org/involved_organicDirectory.asp then type into the search box the words 'vegetable box schemes' to find local organic box schemes.