



# Boxing clever

Step up to the variety challenge and save money with a veg box from your local growers

Words by Carol Trewin  
Photographs by Rebecca Bernstein



Main Greg Pascoe with one of Cusgarne's veg hampers

**T**he continuing growth of the vegetable box sector, where boxes are delivered direct to the home or workplace, indicates that an increasing number of customers, at all income levels, look forward to the challenge and excitement of what the weekly box brings, and the variety of dishes that can be created from the contents. The tyranny of endless weeks of eating swede and cabbage has virtually disappeared. Many businesses have evolved to encourage those who are unsure, offering recipe advice, a choice of contents, while some also have the option of adding other products.

There are arguments for and against. In favour of the weekly vegetable box: fresh, seasonal vegetables with real flavour, fewer food miles, food security, convenience of regular delivery, good for the local economy, retaining and creating rural jobs and keeping the countryside alive. Against: unfamiliar vegetables, lack of skills to cook them, cost and a perception that vegetable boxes are the preserve of wealthy foodies. Some people are also put off by the appearance, not realising that muddy carrots keep much longer than the washed and bagged variety found in supermarkets, and usually taste better, too.

One of the first veg box schemes in Cornwall was from Cusgarne, near Truro, where Greg and Theresa Pascoe sell a range of vegetables, fruit, herbs and salad leaves grown organically on their farm.

"In the summer if everything goes right, the standard boxes would be 100 per cent home-grown," says Greg. Like most growers selling direct to the public, they find that they have to buy in some produce to fill the gap months between the last of the winter and the first early spring vegetables, when choice is very limited. Others add carefully selected extras to maintain variety and make sure customers don't migrate to the supermarkets.

The Pascoes have responded to customer demand and developed their boxes, which they call hampers, over the 15 years that they have been delivering to an area that stretches from Fowey to Porthleven to St Agnes. They include free-range, organic eggs and customers can order organic beef from the farm's herd of South Devon beef cattle. (Standard with eggs £8.50, fruit and vegetables £11.50, customers' choice from £14).

They are certain that organic box schemes are not an expensive option. "For the higher value hampers the amounts spent can be anything from £30 to £40," says Greg. "Our customers get a good deal from us. We are selling organic at prices that probably save money over conventional vegetables."

Added to the convenience of not having to carry bulky vegetables home, there is little wasteful packaging compared >



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## Healthy Boxes

### AFFORDABLE FOOD

#### Supporting the local economy

The Healthy Boxes scheme started in Penwith as a project to give less well-off families easy access to affordable fresh fruit and vegetables. Most of the produce for the 350 weekly boxes comes from 12 local growers and is packed by a local packhouse. Initially, the boxes were distributed to collection points in the Kerrier and West Penwith districts - now extended to St Austell and Lostwithiel - from where customers pick them up. Recognising that many younger families have difficulty cooking and preparing vegetables, the boxes contain recipes featuring some of the contents and other information such as how to use leftovers. This scheme is subsidised to make the boxes affordable, costing £4.50 for boxes ordered by community groups, £5 to other groups (minimum of 10 boxes per drop). Fresh Start vouchers are available for those on low incomes. The no-choice boxes usually contain eight items, and a website shows what's in each week's box. A typical spring box might have purple sprouting broccoli, potatoes, spring greens, swede, onions, celery, lettuce and some fruit. For a list of the drop-off points and how to register for a box, visit the website.

Info Healthy Boxes 01736 811124  
www.healthyboxes.com



“We are selling organic at prices that probably save money over conventional vegetables” says Greg



with supermarket fruit and vegetables. Trying to be as sustainable as possible, Cusgarne only uses bags for salad leaves, potatoes and carrots, and the produce is packed in recycled and recyclable plastic boxes.

This ethos is shared by one of Cornwall's larger schemes, Keveral Community Growers, which has incorporated the long-running Keveral organic vegetable box scheme. Three horticultural businesses - Butterville, Keveral and Skygrove - work with a few other local growers to produce a range of organic produce that make up 150 boxes each week. (Small box £10, family box £15).

As with many other groups, the emphasis is on supplying the freshest produce with the minimum waste, while working efficiently. "Most of our customers don't want surplus packaging or too many food miles. We try to provide the healthiest, most nutritious food they could want," Sean O'Neill of Keveral explains.

At the other end of the scale, Cornwall has several smaller vegetable box businesses, supplying perhaps only a couple of dozen boxes a week. Michael and Karen Harrison, at Maxworthy between Launceston and Bude, are a typical example. "Because we are in a very rural location we wanted to provide another service to the local community, and it snowballed," Karen says. Like all the other businesses she is very environmentally aware, only delivering within a 10-mile radius of their smallholding to keep down food miles. During the summer customer numbers are boosted by holiday makers, many of whom take tailor-made organic boxes home with them.

The vegetable box concept has extended beyond its organic origins, with some businesses selling non-organic vegetables and other produce. Trevelley Farm, near Newquay has a farm produce box scheme that offers a range of vegetables with or without other produce. Customers can select what they want or take pot luck with the farm's selection of what is best each week (from £10). What started as a service to local customers has been extended to delivering to self-catering holiday cottages during the summer season.

Recent research from Exeter University confirms what the veg boxers already knew, that a home delivery is a better option than travelling more than a few miles to the nearest farm shop. As greener eating becomes more important, vegetable boxes, whether organic or not, have a lot going for them. <

Info Cusgarne Organic Farm, Cusgarne Wollas, Cusgarne, Truro. 01872 865922 www.cusgarne.org

Hendra Farm Organics, Hendra Farm, Rose, Truro. 01872 572301 www.hendrafarmorganics.co.uk

Keveral Community Growers, Keveral Farm, Looe. 01503 250226 www.keveral.co.uk

Maxworthy Organics, Pattacombe, Maxworthy, North Petherwin, Launceston. 01566 781768 www.maxworthyorganics.co.uk

Tree of Life Organics, Scala Nija, Mithian, St Agnes. 01872 552661 www.treeoflifeorganics.co.uk

Trevelley Farm, Lane, Newquay. 01637 872310 www.trevelleyfarm.com

