

Bulk buying from wholefood wholesalers

Contributed by Bugs

Many people have already managed to make a positive difference with their fresh food shopping. Fruit and vegetables can be cheaper, fresher, and tastier from box schemes, allotments and local grocers. You may have found a better range of traceable meat and fish from farm shops, farmers markets and local butchers. Enthusiasts of these sources say they need only frequent the supermarkets for tins, toilet roll and toothpaste. I'd say you can find a better supplier for even these items – shop as a cooperative and you can apply the same benefits – traceability, a better deal for suppliers, better variety and even, in most cases, lower costs – to most of your groceries.

What is a cooperative?

Also known as buying groups, these are usually a fairly informal arrangement, where a group of people agree to buy in bulk and split the costs and goods as they wish. The group may be a family, a group of neighbours, or in my case, colleagues at work. Nobody earns any money from the arrangement and it's not a business, and you need only go in to formal arrangements for payments if it suits you, for example if you're sharing your order with people you don't know so well.

What Downsizer members in buying groups say:

Wizz, Lembas customer - “We (a group of about six households) anticipate making one order every 4-6 weeks as that is about the frequency of delivery to our area. We need to make up an order of £150 to qualify for free delivery - but so far I've managed to do this easily solely on my own bit of the order!”

Bugs, Suma customer - “Working full time it saves me a lot of stress and travel to get most of my groceries from Suma. I share most of my order with a colleague at work who takes advantage of the organic baby products...and beer, and then other colleagues take smaller amounts. We place an order whenever we have enough to make it worthwhile for the driver to visit so it can vary from a couple of weeks to a couple of months.”

Who do cooperatives buy from?

Details of suppliers across the country are listed at the end of this article. Their main business is wholesale to independent health food shops but many will be happy to sell to individuals or buying groups provided you can meet their criteria.

So what are these criteria?

Most of these wholesalers feel a loyalty to their retailers so you won't be able to get a delivery if there is such a retailer near to you. The best thing to do is to contact your preferred wholesaler and ask if they will supply a buying group in your area.

You'll need to fulfill their minimum order (usually in the range of £200 - £350 depending on your distance from their depot, but occasionally much less)

You'll need to appoint one person who will be responsible for paying the bills – they can't run a successful business if their drivers have to hang around counting pennies from 14 people trying to work out how much they owe for half a crate of tinned tomatoes and a bulk pot of peanut butter!

As a result of new laws, if you want to buy alcohol, you will need to provide the supplier with proof (photocopy of passport/driving licence etc) that the buyer is over 18.

You will need to have somewhere appropriate to make the delivery to – it's difficult for a HGV to get down a winding lane, and then there's the unloading and delivering to your house. You probably don't want the neighbours to speculate about why exactly you want so much toilet roll.

Someone will need to be at home to accept the delivery, help the driver unload it, give it a once over (most give you a period of grace to get back to them with major problems but try to check everything is there and not obviously damaged) sign for the delivery and arrange payment. So it's probably not a good idea to have your order sent to Granny who only deals with cash, in her olde worlde cottage up the second muddy lane past the stables.

So why would I want to form a buying group, and what's the catch?

I'm relatively new to this, and didn't know anyone personally who already uses this method, but now I'm a great enthusiast of the concept. However there are both advantages and disadvantages and it may not be for everyone.

Advantages of buying groups:

- Less carrying and travel – Suma for example arranges its delivery routes to be as efficient as possible and the delivery people are extremely helpful – it has cut our supermarket shopping to the bone.
 - Better choice – organic tinned veg, all sorts of unusual dried fruit, bread flours, and food for special diets, all of which are difficult to find elsewhere.
 - Bulk quantities mean less packaging - for example I can buy 3kg of risotto rice in a heavy, reusable plastic sack, ideal for using up veg, leftover meat and stock, and the fungi harvest, rather than six cute little boxes with the same recipe I won't use and the rice still wrapped individually inside! Or 3kg tins of tomatoes or kidney beans so I can make several meals worth of chilli or pasta sauce at once, and use the large tins for a range of other uses (see the forums for suggestions!). Or 5 litres of washing liquid in a neat square bottle that's easy to store, rather than several bottles.
 - Cuts plastic carrier bags - rather than the typical supermarket home delivery with scores of unnecessary carriers, Suma at least (and quite probably the other) packs smaller goods in leftover cardboard boxes which can be reused or recycled.
 - Nicer people to give your money to – these type of suppliers are much more likely to consider ethical, social and ecological implications of the products they supply as well as their profit margin. Andrew Mackintosh of Suma says: ”Our customers trust to us make the right decisions on their behalf and that is not something that we take lightly.” Their employees tend to enjoy better treatment and more respect than the typical supermarket employee and it shows through in their customer service – in six months of shopping with Suma I have only ever met with genuinely friendly and helpful staff from credit control to the delivery driver (who may well prove to be the same person, as Suma employees generally perform several roles!)
 - Freedom from the weekly supermarket run – these days I can generally pick up fresh milk and odd bits and pieces in my lunch hour or on the way home from work – gone are the days of a Saturday morning wasted at the supermarket or getting home starving at 9.30pm after a struggle at the all-night hypermarket.
 - Cuts costs - (roughly 30% cheaper than the shops, sometimes more, but occasionally less)
- What other Downsizer members say about the advantages:

Wizz: “You can get organic and other produce at wholesale prices. Lembas are also good in that they will allow you to split many of the cases that they supply into half or quarter cases. Lembas also accepts credit cards which for the organiser (me!) means that I can put the purchase on the card and collect what is owed, without risking the overdraft.”

Disadvantages:

- High upfront costs for the person responsible for paying (so you may need a more formal arrangement for payment upfront from your fellow members)
- Storage of large quantities – although because of the packaging this can be easier than you would think, and dividing your order with other members helps further (eg share four tins of cooking oil between friends, or split a case of washing up liquid or soap).
- You need to be careful to use up the larger quantities efficiently. Downsizer member Sandra17 says: “Think carefully about use by dates for your chosen items. Bulk oats for porridge in winter is fantastic but if you order bulk semi-fresh pesto then one of two things will happen: you use so much quickly that it is yummy but expensive or you don't use it quickly enough and end up throwing stuff out.”
- Arranging to be at home for delivery time convenient to the driver – but then, it's much more pleasant to be at home than queuing in the supermarket
- Getting things out to your fellow members – my cooperative is based at work and I generally have it delivered there, and get a lift back with the other main buyer in the group, who lives further out in my direction. For most people it might be more convenient to share an order with friends, family and neighbours who you see often. Making separate deliveries can negate all the advantages of group buying!
- Working out what the goods actually are, without being able to examine them or look at the ingredients list – the catalogues supplied are fairly basic and some of the descriptions can be a little cryptic. However most of those listed here are vegetarian suppliers and will note whether goods are vegan, organic, gluten free etc, and will be very helpful if you need to verify something particular, as long as you can give them the item number to look up.

So what sort of things can you buy?

Almost everything that you need from a supermarket – they don't sell CDs or discount televisions and vacuum cleaners, but you can get all those tins and toiletries that lure you in to the supermarket regularly. If you are still fixed on

Persil washing liquid and Sure deodorant then it won't supply everything you need, but why not give some more alternatives a go – Bio D does very good cleaning products and there are less harsh but perfectly effective toiletries from Green People and Suma's own brand products. If you're not sure about a product and don't want to risk winding up with a dozen bottles of something you and your friends won't use, why not take a trip to a wholefood retailer and try out a few products from them first?

Tips for a successful buying group:

- Start small, with members you know you can trust to make their own decisions – and pay up!
- Consider whether you will be able to use up all of a product, or whether you can split a case or a bag – spices are a good example - with another member of your group
- If you will use a lot of a product see if you can buy a bulk pack rather than a case – for example a 25kg bag of bread flour if you do a lot of baking is cheaper and often easier to store than even a dozen kilo bags.
- Be prepared when your delivery arrives. Make sure you have a clear space to unload your order so you can give it a once over and let the driver head off to the next delivery quickly. Downsizer member Sandra17 suggests: “A big marker pen is very useful for when the delivery arrives. Label every box with the owner's name and make piles. Saves loads of time as your friends come to collect and very helpful if your toddler likes to move boxes around despite your best attempts at organising.”
- Think laterally, if the supplier doesn't stock your usual brand, is there an alternative you could choose?
- If you aren't sure you'll like a product see if you can buy a single one next time you're near a healthfood shop
- You may also be able to buy dairy products from your wholesaler – again, consider sharing with your fellow members or freezing butter for baking.
- Be organised to save time for future orders. Downsizer member Sandra17 buys from Infinity and suggests: “I get everyone to attach their order sheets to the catalogue so that as it goes round, people can highlight anything they want to go halves on. Then put it all on Excel if you have it (this enables you to reuse codes later and thus saves time for regular coop organisers) with each product clearly linked to the buyer.”
- Suma can supply a catalogue in Excel which is easy to compile an order from and very straightforward to search – and it saves a lot of paper too!

What if it's still not for me?

You may live near a good supplier – ask the wholesaler for a list of their retailers in your area – there are some very large ones such as Daily Bread where you may be able to have many of the same benefits of lower prices, better-sourced products and a much pleasanter shopping experience! Such suppliers often stock local products such as breads, dairy products and prepared meals.

Where to start?

Many wholesalers will deliver country-wide with minimum orders varying according to the distance – but you'll probably want to start with the one most local to you. Here are some starting points for wholesalers who may be prepared to sell to buying groups, but remember these are ethical suppliers and if they already supply a local retailer they may choose not to supply to buying groups. They're all generally very helpful - get in touch, ask if they would supply you, then request a catalogue - an electronic version is more environmentally friendly and easier to make an order from, but for your first order you might want to ask if they can provide a hard copy so you can get to grips with it in the bath or take it to the supermarket to compare prices and push yourself in to giving it a try!

National – Brighton - <http://www.infinityfoods.co.uk/>

National – Yorkshire - <http://www.suma.co.uk/>

Scotland – Highland Wholefoods, Inverness - 01463 712222

Cornwall - <http://www.wholefood.net/>

Sheffield - <http://www.lembas.co.uk/> - Downsizer member Wizz says “run on ethical grounds. Re provenance of produce - strictly no GM produce and they're very good at listing country of origin and ingredients in various mueslis and mixes etc. So far I have found them to be extremely helpful and keen to please”.

Midlands, Wales, Herefordshire, Shropshire, Worcestershire, Gloucestershire - Survival Wholefoods, Leominster 01568 614147

Eire - <http://www.mwf.ie/>

Still have any questions? Have a look at this thread - “anyone ever taken part in a co-op” on the Downsizer.net forums – and ask away!

With thanks to Downsizer.net members Wizz, Sandra17 and Macatsuma for comments, tips and information.

Some pictures to prove that bulk buying doesn't necessarily require an outhouse and utility room for storage!

Most fruit, nuts, seeds and pulses etc are available in 1kg bags that stack easily and keep well

Flour is available in different sizes according to brand - this is 25kg from Doves Farm (blue bag), 5kg from Watermill, and 5 x1.5kg from Marriage's.

Buying household cleaning stuff in 5 litre bottles takes up little more room than the usual 1.5 litre bottles.