

Labor for Pennsylvania Vineyards

Vineyards are a labor intensive brand of farming. In fact, when some traditional farmers from dairy or row crops call me about planting grapes, after I explain to them the amount of hand labor involved there is usually a long pause and then a sudden lack of enthusiasm. Labor is one of the greatest challenges in running a sizeable vineyard. First, a manager must find the people. Then they need to be trained. There is the expense of having additional help. And then there are the compliance and regulatory requirements associated with having employees. Dealing with personnel issues is a great challenge in itself. Often language and culture can be a barrier.

Experienced hand labor is essential to many viticultural practices. From planting vines to harvesting the crop, it takes gentle and skilled hands to insure the healthiest vines and best possible quality of grapes.

Here is a list of the major vineyard tasks requiring hand labor:

1. Pruning and brush pulling
2. Tying and training vines
3. Suckering and shoot thinning
4. Moving wires, tucking shoots.
5. Shoot positioning
6. Leaf pulling
7. Cluster thinning
8. Harvest

Other tasks include: hedging, hoeing, planting

Most of these are skilled tasks. While pulling leaves may sound easy to do – there is a definite technique to proper leafing and it can be done well or very poorly. Pruning, of course, requires judgment and skill. We all strive for consistency in many aspects of our lives, vines like consistency as well. If your vineyard is pruned by a different crew every year, it is likely to suffer from variations in yield and quality. Tying, tucking and shoot positioning all require gentle hands. For cluster thinning judgment is necessary about which clusters to remove. Harvest may be the most difficult labor situation. When the grapes get ripe, they are ready to pick and you will need a large group of people to harvest them on time. A good picker in California can harvest almost a ton a day. In our area, a picker might take half that amount on a good day. As timing is critical to good wine quality – the necessary labor must be available at the right moment.

Payroll costs will likely be your vineyard's biggest operating expense. It will include wages, overtime, worker's compensation, social security and medicare. Other benefits such as health insurance and bonuses can increase your costs. You want to offer a wage that is competitive with other vineyards and local ag industries. Again, the goal is to keep a stable work force and reduce turnover to a minimum.

What is the size of a vineyard that needs additional help besides your own efforts? Well, that depends on many things. Are you a full time grower, or just spending weekends and evenings in the vineyard? Do you have other sources of help like friends and family? In my experience, a full time vineyardist can manage about 5-10 acres on his or her own. After that, help will be needed on a regular basis. Even with small acreages, additional assistance will be required at harvest.

The labor situation in our vineyards is not ideal. There are a lot of reasons for this from a healthy economy to a small agricultural labor pool. Some vineyards with orchards have their labor already built in. But for a new grower, it's hard to find the necessary help to get all the jobs done. In my experience the best workers are seasonal – they tend to have more agricultural experience and are hardy enough to work under adverse conditions like rain, snow, heat and humidity. At the vineyard I managed in Oregon, we had a permanent crew of 8 people that farmed our 100 acres plus our neighbor's 60 acre vineyard. The most important thing was to keep this crew busy full time so they could not jump to another job or vineyard. Most Pennsylvania vineyards are small so I would encourage a group of neighboring vineyards to develop loyalty and experience among a core crew of workers and keep them busy full time, year round. Initially, it is unlikely that the people will have experience working with vines. They will have to be properly trained and supervised until they can work well on their own. Not having to retrain workers is one of the main reasons to retain experienced labor. Hopefully a crew leader will emerge who will take on greater responsibility and relieve you of the necessity of being in the field all the time. After 12 years, my foreman was telling ME what to do. He became my eyes and ears in the vineyard and the glue that held the crew together. It was so nice to just say to Javiere – okay, we start pruning on this date and it would just happen. No training necessary.

Finding agricultural labor can be difficult. I would suggest that you contact other vineyards and ask them if they have any surplus help or suggestions. The seasonal labor pool has amazing connections within itself, unlike anything in mainstream American culture. Chances are a worker will have a brother, cousin or friend who might be looking for work. Look to other more established labor intensive ag industries like mushrooms, nurseries, orchards, Christmas trees and others that might have a labor pool that you can draw upon. You can call their associations or individual businesses to see if they have extra workers. Even if you start with just one person, he or she might become the core of a great crew. I strongly suggest that groups of vineyards in an area combine acreages to provide enough full time, year round work for a small crew.

Sharing labor with other ag crops may be complicated. For example, apples and grape ripen and need to be pruned at the same time in Adams County. The mushroom growers pretty much use their labor all year long. But they have something that we need and it only takes one individual to start a good crew. Be creative in your solutions.

Wages vary from farm to farm. Federal and Pennsylvania minimum wage is currently \$5.15. Make absolutely sure that anyone doing piece work is making at least minimum wage. This is required by law. I have heard wages between \$6.50 and \$9.00 per hour for regular field help. Equipment operators traditionally earn at least 25% more. Crew leaders might earn up to 50% more than regular workers. It is important to know what other vineyards are paying and what it will cost to keep your best workers on the farm. Of course, every vineyard has its own economic parameters and that will factor into the payroll limits.

Agricultural labor contractors provide manpower to farmers. There are pros and cons to using a contractor. Most people hire contract labor because it's easy. You avoid all the paper work and just write one check. The down side is the cost – a contractor's labor will generally be 10-30% above what you might pay directly to an employee. That is because the contractor takes a cut of each worker's check. Some contractors take a sizeable portion of the check and often charge high rates for housing and food. I have heard charges from \$9 to \$16 per hour here in Pennsylvania. Some contractors charge by the piece – one charges 50 cents per vine for pruning and 15 cents for tying. If you use a labor contractor the very least you need to do is to be certain that he is properly licensed and bonded. A federal license may be necessary as well. The 1984 Immigration Act makes contractors and those who use their services joint employers. If the contractor defaults on his payroll, you may be held liable. Your common sense and good judgment will be tested in finding a good labor contractor. There are no contractors in Southeast Pennsylvania who have experience in vineyards. However, crews from New York have come down to help our growers. You can obtain a full list of all labor contractors licensed and bonded in Pennsylvania from the Department of Labor and Industry. Use this list to find contractors in your area and conduct in depth interviews before you reach an agreement.

Temporary labor services offer people for short term jobs. These companies generally do not have workers with agricultural experience and can be more expensive than most other options. It certainly represents a last option if necessary. Labor-Ready is available in many areas and has supplied workers to Pennsylvania vineyards.

Landscape companies often have adequate labor pools with experience working in ornamentals. They can easily learn to prune and work with your vines. Landscapers are often looking for alternative work in the winter, they can be hired to prune, pull brush and tie. A landscaper can help to take care of summer vineyard tasks.

The H2-A and H2-B programs are available to bring legal seasonal labor into agriculture industries. The program is only practical for large companies who might require 20 or more workers. H2-A brings workers from Mexico to work for a designated employer for 10 months. You may or may not get workers with agricultural experience. Housing must be provided and a minimum wage is set in various regions. Here in Pennsylvania it is \$9.37 per hour. The whole process may cost \$20,000. One Pennsylvania company hired a Texas-based consultant to do all the paperwork with a power-of-attorney. The benefit is a stable and legal workforce. This program is run through the INS so contact them for more information.

Language difficulties can be a major challenge in hiring seasonal labor. In Pennsylvania, seasonal workers come from Mexico, Puerto Rico, Central and South America, Southeast Asia and elsewhere. Be prepared to explain complex vineyard tasks to non-english speakers. There is an excellent book called *Spanish In The Field: Practical Spanish for Ranchers, Farmers or Vintners*. By Clough, Comegys and Sadler from Panorama West Books in Fresno, CA. ISBN 0-914330-59-4. It has key pictures, phrases, terminology needed on the farm and for grapes and wineries.

Be aware that housing and transportation may be an additional problem. True seasonal labor tend to move about frequently. Once your employees become established at your work place, they will likely be able to find their own housing and vehicles.

Compliance and regulations governing employees needs a separate article but I will mention the basics here. The current labor laws represent an incredible maze of regulation, both state and federal, that often contradicts itself. There are, however, some basic requirements that all employers must fulfill. You should have the following forms on file for every employee:

1. Immigration and Naturalization Service I-9 – verifies the right to work in the United States. Most seasonal workers will display an Labor contractor list I-551 card. Other types of identification(s) will satisfy the requirements. Be sure to photocopy the front and back of each document. Fill out the I-9 completely and accurately. If you are audited, you will be penalized for each line that has not been completed correctly.
2. Internal Revenue Service W-4 – another mandatory form, it identifies social security and the number of employee deductions. If possible, make a copy of a social security card.
3. U.S. Department of Labor Form WH-516 – is an agreement between the worker and the employer. It outlines basic conditions of employment such as wage, benefits, type of work, period of work and more. This form is required for seasonal labor. I recommend it for all farm employees.
4. I would encourage all grower/employers to develop an employee handbook for your own benefit as well as the employees. This document outlines all the requirements for the job and can help to avoid misunderstandings.

The United States Department of Labor, the Environmental Protection Agency, the Pennsylvania Department of Labor and Industries and the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture, Occupational Health and Safety all have regulations governing workplace safety, conditions, wages, transportation, housing and much more. I will soon follow up with an article on how to be compliant to these agencies. Be aware that both state and federal agencies expect your compliance. You may want to familiarize yourself with Worker Protection Standards (WPS), Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA), and the Migrant and Seasonal Labor Protection Act (MSPA). (See web sites below)

Machines offer some hope of help in the long term, but no immediate relief. While there are a few machine harvesters in our midst, it will be a while before vineyards are of enough critical mass to afford the kind of cutting edge technology that is currently being employed in European vineyards. Most Pennsylvania vineyards are too small to afford their own specialized equipment.

Labor conservation is another tactic. Simply design your vineyard to minimize the need for labor, or maximize the use of machines. A single canopy is less labor intensive than a divided canopy. A hanging trellis system requires less attention than an upright VSP. Design a system that can be pre-pruned and machine harvested. Plant grapes that are more rot resistant and don't require leaf pulling. Certain varieties sucker more vigorously than others. Use the correct rootstock to moderate the size of your vines, thus requiring less pruning, brush pulling and canopy management. You have lots of choices.

But when employees become part of your business, these virtues are well worth cultivating... Loyalty = reliability = easier management. Experience = speed and efficiency = cost savings. Quality = better wine = higher prices for grapes. Treat your workers well and they will likely reward you with years of fine grapes.

Be creative and innovative in your hiring practices. Think of the type of work you need to have done and the best person to do it. You don't want to hire a Spanish speaking field hand for work in the tasting room. Nor do you want someone who would be most comfortable pouring wine in an air conditioned tasting room out in the field shoot positioning. My experience has been that Hispanic workers are the hardest working people I have ever met. They will work under stressful and unpleasant conditions and do a great job – if they are paid well and treated with respect and fairness. The Latino culture is amazingly generous, hospitable and friendly. But it is, in a word, different from ours. Be aware of this fact and learn to adjust. In Oregon, we hired a labor service to help with personnel issues that usually boiled down to cultural differences. It is well worth seeking out this kind of organization. They can assist you with WPS training, payroll, mediation, legal requirements, documentation and much more.

Resources:

1. Rural Opportunities is a placement service for seasonal labor. They have numerous offices around the state.
 - a. Lancaster Office. Lordis Martinez 717 296-9582
 - b. Kennett Square. Nita D'Agustino 610 925-5600
 - c. Reading Elvin Gonzales 610 376-6319Also offices in Chambersburg and Erie.

Friends of Farm Workers in Philadelphia. Ms. Maria Rivera - 800 729-1607 or 215 733-0878 x140

2. Agricultural Labor Contractors

PA – See Pennsylvania Department of Labor and Industries

NY – Victor Feria operates a large vineyard labor contracting business in the Finger Lakes. He has sent workers to Pennsylvania on a limited basis in the past. If vineyards can pool acres, it may be worth his time and effort to keep a regular crew in the area. Be sure to keep legal issues in mind. 315 536-2056

VA – No formal labor contractors. Vineyards have their own employees. Some work with H2A.

3. PA Dept of Labor and industries. James Murman. 800 932-0665 or 717 787-1930. He as a licensed agricultural labor contractor list for Pennsylvania.
4. Other Ag Industries that use seasonal labor:
 - a. American Mushroom Institute, Avondale, PA. 202 842-4344
 - b. State Horticulture Association of PA, Orrtanna, PA. 717 677-4184
 - c. PA Landscape and Nursery Assoc., Harrisburg, PA. 717 238-1675
 - d. PA Christmas Tree Growers Assoc., Millheim, PA. 814 349-518

Useful Web Sites:

1. U.S Immigration and Naturalization Service – <http://www.ins.gov/graphics/index.htm>
2. U.S. Department of Labor – <http://www.dol.gov>
 - a. H2A – <http://www.dol.gov/dol.asp/public/programs/handbook/h2a.htm>
 - b. MSPA – <http://www.dol.gov/dol.asp/public/programs/handbook/mspa.htm>
 - c. FLSA – <http://www.dol.gov/dol.asp/public/programs/handbook/minwage.htm>
3. Environmental Protection Agency – <http://www.epa.gov/>
 - a. WPS – <http://ww.epa.gov/pesticides/safety/workers/workers.htm>
4. Social Security Administration – <http://www.ssa.gov/>
5. Internal Revenue Service – <http://www.irs.gov/>
6. Occupational Health and Safety – <http://www.osha.gov>
7. Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture – <http://www.pda.state.pa.us/>
8. Pennsylvania Bureau of Labor and Industries - <http://www.LI.state.pa.us>
 - a. PA labor standards - www.LI.state.pa.us/PWAGE/lstd.html
9. Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection – <http://www.dep.state.pa.us/farmers/default.htm>