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## **The Importance of H-2A Workers at Sam Mazza's Farm**

Vern Grubinger, Extension Professor, University of Vermont

Hepburn Montague has been working at Sam Mazza's fruit and vegetable farm for 27 years, even though he lives about two thousand miles away. Hepburn is from Manchester, Jamaica, and every year he travels to and from the same farm in Colchester, Vermont. He is one of about 400 Vermont farm workers in the temporary seasonal worker program commonly known as H-2A.

Gary Bombard is co-owner and production manager at Mazza's and he works side-by-side with two dozen Jamaican men each year, plus or minus, to plant, maintain and harvest a wide variety of crops on over 350 acres of land and 17 greenhouses. "We would not be able to farm without these guys," says Gary. "It's pretty easy to get the crops in the ground but then the hard work starts because there are only so many mechanical aids. You've got to have manual labor, especially to harvest."



*Gary Bombard with Hepburn Montague, far right, and other H2-A Workers*

"We do hire local people when they apply, but many don't show up on time, or at all. Those that do we are happy to have and they quickly develop a respect for the Jamaicans after working with them in the field; 'How do those guys do it?' they ask. There's a lot of bending over, and long days. But it's more than just physical labor; back home the Jamaicans have to improvise a lot and they bring that skill and common sense here.

For example, one of the men has become our irrigation expert-- he knows how to put the pieces of the system together and fix problems to make it work; he doesn't need me to tell him what to do."

"We understand what working is all about" says Hepburn. "But in Jamaica, even if you have a job, you can't be sure if you'll have work or if you'll get paid. You go to work today and tomorrow there's no money there. Here, you come to work, and you know what you're going to make, and you can plan what to put away. It's very good because it's helped me a lot, and many other people, too. I don't think I would live in a house the way I want to, or be able to send my kids to school. I have four children and in Jamaica you have to pay for the government schools not just the private schools and it's very expensive."

"It was hard at first to be away so much but you get used to it. Now, this is our home and we have another home in Jamaica. It's good to move around; we see and learn a lot of things in the U.S. The men come from all walks of life and all the parishes in Jamaica. You have to apply to the government to enter the program, pass a medical test, and be fit to work; then you get an ID card. In the spring they call you and tell you when they will fly you from Kingston to Florida. From there we take a charter bus to New York, and men get off along the way to take other buses or vans that go to their farms. At first you don't know who is coming with you but then it is the same men coming back each year."

Gary explains, "We send in a list of names of the men that have already been here that we want to come back, which is usually all of them. Our guys are family men, they come here to work and send their money home. A private travel company in Florida takes our paperwork and makes the arrangements with the Jamaican government."

The H-2A agricultural guest worker program establishes a legal means for agricultural employers who anticipate a shortage of domestic workers to bring foreign workers to the U.S. to perform temporary or seasonal labor. It's not the first program to do this, the Bracero contract labor program allowed millions of workers to come from Mexico to harvest crops in the Southwestern United States between 1942-1964. Now, the H-2A program is open to workers from over 50 countries, many in the Caribbean. In recent years it has grown, allowing about 60,000 workers annually to come to this country to work. While it's an important program, it hardly makes a dent in the need for foreign farm workers which is estimated to be up to 3 million people a year in the U.S., and it's estimated that half of all these workers are undocumented.

H-2A is not a simple program for farmers to participate in. It requires the involvement of three federal agencies. The Department of Labor (DOL) issues the labor certifications and oversees compliance with labor laws; U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) approves the individual petitions from workers, and the Department of State (DOS) issues their visas through overseas consulates.

Laurie Bombard is the farm's co-owner and general manager. She is responsible for completing the necessary paperwork for the farm's participation in the H2A program. "We depend on these workers every year and every year I cross my fingers that I clear all the hurdles and our workers are here when we need them. The process begins 2 months ahead of date of need; we submit a job order with the Department of Labor and an application seeking temporary labor certification. Once this application is accepted for processing the farm must begin the positive recruitment of local workers. We have very specific guidelines to follow for placing ads, contacting previous workers and setting up interviews. We are also required to advertise in 3 additional states beyond Vermont. After submitting recruitment results with luck the farm will receive the certification for temporary employment which is necessary before submitting an I-129 petition to Citizenship and Immigration Services."

"It seems that every year the requirements change to take part in the program, and a problem with any of the application steps can slow down or halt the process of receiving our workers so they may not get here when the harvest is beginning. Although this program is a necessary part of our labor force, every year is a new and tedious process. It would be great if our government representatives would recognize the importance of these farm workers and make this process user friendly."

Gary adds "The H2A program requires us to pay for transportation to and from the farm to Jamaica, and we provide good housing, which gets inspected. We pay a decent, pre-determined hourly wage. The program is expensive for us but well worth it. These guys keep us in business, and we're a team. I would not ask Hepburn to do anything I wouldn't do, though granted he is going to do it faster. These guys are here every day, all day, in the growing season, willing to work. In America there are just too many easy paths for people to take besides hard work."



*H2-A Workers Pick Strawberries at Sam Mazza's Farm*

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