

## How Do the Oregon and Ohio Hispanic Nursery Workforces Differ?

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The greenhouse and nursery industry is the second most important agricultural sector in the United States in terms of economic output (7). The wholesale nursery industry was the largest sector in horticultural sales in the United States in 1998, representing 29.2% of a \$10.6 billion industry.

Oregon and Ohio are two major nursery production states, ranking third and fourth nationally, respectively (15). In 1996, the nursery/landscape industry contributed an estimated \$659.7 million to Ohio's economy through employee payroll (14). Ohio nursery stock dealers and producers provided statewide employment opportunities for an estimated 31,651 year-round full-time workers, 17,437 year-round part-time workers, and 41,548 seasonal workers (14).

In 1997, the nursery wholesale industry contributed an estimated \$179 million to Oregon's economy through employee payroll (10). Nursery stock producers provided statewide employment opportunities for 8,050 year-round full-time workers and 12,750 seasonal workers (10).

Approximately 60% of the Ohio nursery industry workforce and 90% of the Oregon

workforce is composed of Hispanic employees who fill year-round full-time, year-round part-time, and seasonal positions (12).

Many of these Hispanic employees in both states understand little English. Spanish is their primary language. Little information is available in Spanish to Hispanic nursery, landscape, and retail workers and managers (4).

Several complicated issues exist in securing a stable nursery industry workforce for today's U.S. nursery industry. These issues include legalization, availability and retention of workers (9), and reduction of workforce as a result of mechanization (5). Labor shortages and maintaining a stable work force were the Ohio Nursery and Landscape Association's (ONLA) highest-rated needs affecting the industry (13).

J. Frank Schmidt & Son Co., Boring, Oregon, one of Oregon's larger nursery stock producers, indicated that labor is the nursery industry's No. 1 issue nationally (9).

One way to address these labor issues is by surveying the Hispanic workers in Oregon and Ohio. The goal of these surveys was to better understand the backgrounds and technical needs of this audience in order to help stabilize and engage the existing work force through

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education. Our expectation was that Hispanic employees could advance and work more effectively and productively through education and training.

Another issue involved in securing a stable nursery industry workforce is the seasonal nature of the industry, with peak activity time occurring in the spring (8). The Ohio nursery industry is more seasonal than the Oregon industry; however, both states face the same immense challenge of hiring enough seasonal workers to fill spring demands.

Many workers from foreign countries want to fill seasonal and full-time nursery positions that are unwanted by sufficient numbers of U.S. workers. The main reason Mexican workers want U.S. jobs is the superior pay of positions in the United States.

Labor in Mexico is abundant and cheap (3). The average salary for an autoworker at a Mexican assembly plant is \$0.90/hour (3), compared to U.S. nursery workers, who may make approximately \$9.00 to \$12.00/hour.

The Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) of 1986 created two visa programs to help nursery (H2A program) and landscape (H2B program) employers find seasonal alien laborers (6). The majority of certified workers from these programs come from Mexico (3). Despite the provision of these programs, a small number of alien workers enter the payrolls of U.S. firms through sanctioned programs.

Particularly small nursery companies often overlook the H2A program as an option because of the complexity and overlap in regulations from the Department of Labor (DOL), Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), and Department of State

(8). The INS reports as many as 50,000 migrants are crossing the U.S.-Mexico border illegally each month (3) and that 40% of seasonal agricultural workers are illegal (2).

Although the majority of positions held in the nursery industry are seasonal in nature, nursery employers would like employees to return year after year to reduce training needs and build on their experience base (9). Traditionally, the crew leader, production manager, and other supervisory positions are filled from the ranks of seasonal workers who return for multiple years. Attracting a seasonal labor pool to return year after year is a difficult challenge; however, job satisfaction seems to figure high in this scenario (11, 16).

Currently, there are few reference materials for Spanish-speaking employees. Because of this, Spanish-speaking workers cannot stay informed of changes in the laws, recent innovations, new practices, or pesticides. The delivery of technical information to Hispanic employees in Oregon and Ohio by means of a Spanish Newsletter, web site, and educational programs has been one of the first efforts to fulfill this need in the United States (12).

The owners of Ohio and Oregon nurseries and landscape and garden retail businesses view education of employees as essential to job satisfaction (personal communication). They realize that the managers and supervisors of the next five to 10 years will come from the ranks of the Hispanic workforce. Therefore, technical services must be provided to these workers.

These industries realize that education sparks interest, and interested employees are likely to remain in the industry workforce and work more efficiently. If workers' minds are challenged and their knowledge base is increased, the nursery

industry gains better, more successful, and satisfied employees.

In Oregon and Ohio, 375 and 250 surveys, respectively, were distributed to Spanish-speaking nursery employees. In Oregon 193 and in Ohio 127 surveys were completed. The purpose of these surveys was to determine the backgrounds, experience level, and work activities of nursery workers; their technical information interests; and what resources are available to these workers.

The survey response came from three sources — interviews at training programs, on-farm visits, and mailed surveys in a newsletter format. The survey targeted crew leaders, forepersons, and section supervisors, such as propagation area supervisors. These positions are generally supervised by an English-speaking or bilingual nursery production manager.

We reached only those Hispanic employees in both states that the nursery owners felt “merited” the exposure to training programs, newsletters, or on-farm visits. The surveys in Oregon occurred between May 1998 and August 2000. The surveys in Ohio occurred between September 2000 and July 2002. The same multiple-choice and fill-in-the-blank questions were asked in all three formats, in both states.

## **Background, Experience Level, and Topics of Interest**

Several differences, besides the relative percentages of Hispanics filling the workforce, were found between Oregon and Ohio from the survey responses. In Oregon, the employees were primarily Mexican in background. In Ohio, the backgrounds were more diverse and included people from Guatemala, Puerto

Rico, Brazil, Nicaragua, and Mexico. This indicates that there are more cultural and language dialect differences that need to be considered for the Ohio audience. Keeping people from the same country within a crew will mean that a better worker rapport is developed (16). With the diversity that exists in the Ohio workforce, this rapport building may be more of a challenge.

In Oregon, the average survey respondent had 10 years of U.S. nursery experience. Often, the Hispanic crew leader level of staff had 20 to 25 years of experience. Additionally, they had worked all these years at the same nursery. Many of these Oregon crew leaders had high school and occasionally college degrees from Mexico. Many had a considerable grasp of English and were fluent in Spanish.

We found that Ohio’s Latino workers had less experience in the nursery industry than the workers in Oregon and the experience level varied across the state. In central and southern Ohio, survey respondents had an average of two years of nursery experience. In northeastern Ohio, the average survey respondents had worked seven years in U.S. nurseries. Some Hispanic crew leaders in northeastern Ohio had 15 years of experience.

The Hispanic workers surveyed in Oregon indicated 60% of their information came from their bilingual supervisors. The other three educational resources currently available to these workers, in order of importance, were books, other Hispanic coworkers with more experience, and outside professionals, such as Extension personnel.

In Ohio, 90% of workers indicated their bilingual supervisor was their primary learning resource. Less than 10% in Ohio indicated that they had access to books

or outside professionals through their employers. Also, in Ohio, due to the lack of experience base, less mentoring of newer workers was occurring.

The technical topics of greatest interest for surveyed Ohio employees were plant identification (95%) and weed control (90%). This was quite different from the survey results in Oregon. In Oregon, eighty-one percent replied that insect control information was their leading technical information interest, with 77% indicating weed control and 66% disease control. Other interests were nutrition at 55%, propagation 47%, and plant identification 45%.

The differences in experience levels between the two states means a greater challenge exists in Ohio in the conveying of technical information, particularly in central and southwestern Ohio. For example, there could be a nutrition problem that causes a plant to appear yellow, but the normal color of the plant may be yellow.

The central and southwestern Ohio workers may not know the name or normal color of the plant. There's a big need for very basic technical information, particularly for this Ohio audience.

Ohio workers in central and southwestern Ohio also indicated in conversations during the on-farm surveys that without basic plant identification skills, they could not engage in jobs such as shipping, quality control, and/or inventory, which they felt were jobs in which they could advance.

Hispanic employees in Oregon and Ohio were found to be involved in virtually every aspect of nursery production; however, Hispanic workers were very active in performance of pest management activities and several propagation

activities in both states. Less than 5% of those surveyed in either state were women. Few Hispanic women have risen to crew leader or section supervisor. Those Hispanic women surveyed were advancing predominantly in plant propagation in both states.

One criticism that we have received about these projects was that it appears we are advocating that Hispanic workers not learn English. This, however, was not the objective or the result of this work. We have observed in both states, the fastest-advancing workers are often bilingual, and those companies that are experiencing the least turnover in their workforce and the highest worker productivity are companies that are establishing English lesson sessions for their Hispanic employees (16).

Learning English is key to success in any industry in the United States; however, it is hard enough to learn technical material, let alone learn it in another language. Providing *ayuda técnica* — technical help — in their native languages is just one way to speed the development of these workers in their efforts to advance in the industry. Also, the presentation of material in Spanish has been viewed by many Hispanic workers in both states as an acknowledgement and even an extension of appreciation of their culture and the contribution these workers are filling in the U.S. nursery industry.

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