Career Outlook

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From seed to sale: Careers in the produce supply chain

Steven Marcroft | October 2020

We’re used to seeing grocery and restaurant employees working to offer fresh fruits and vegetables. But we rarely see the many workers whose jobs supply that produce.

Thousands of workers contribute to growing, transporting, and selling fresh fruits and vegetables. Their occupations include agricultural equipment operators preparing fields for planting, truck drivers delivering food to vendors, and stockers readying produce for display in the market. And the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) projects numerous openings in these produce supply-chain occupations each year from 2019 to 2029.

Keep reading for data on employment, job outlook, and wages in these occupations, along with information about the education, training, and work experience typically required for entry.

From the farm...

Before planting any crop, certain workers need to prepare the farmland. Agricultural equipment operators use tractors, cultivators, and other farm machinery to till the soil and set the rows for planting. Mechanics and technicians maintain and repair the equipment.

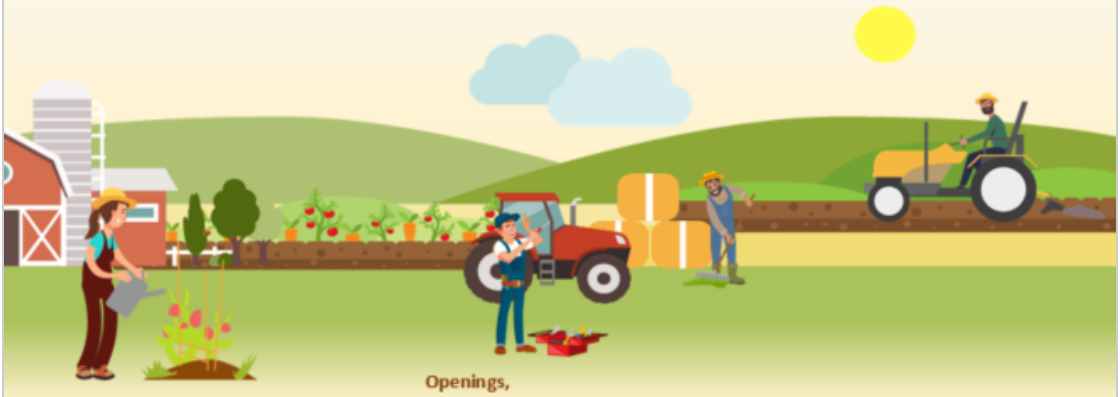
Farmworkers and laborers do a variety of tasks that include planting, fertilizing, irrigating, and harvesting. After harvesting crops, farmworkers and laborers immediately pack and load them for transporting to a cooling and processing facility. There, graders sort and classify the unprocessed fruits or vegetables, and inspectors ensure that the produce is handled in a way that complies with federal safety and health standards.

Other workers help farm operations run smoothly. For example, farm labor contractors may hire additional workers to assist with planting, growing, or picking crops. First-line supervisors direct and coordinate the daily activities of agricultural workers. And farmers and agricultural managers organize crop production in the fields they oversee.

Table 1 shows data for these farm-related occupations across all industries. Employment varied in 2019, from nearly 1 million farmers, ranchers, and other agricultural workers to fewer than 1,000 farm labor contractors.

Table 1. Selected farm-related occupations in supplying produce

Employment and wages, 2019; annual average openings, projected 2019–29; education and experience typically required for entry; and on-the-job training typically required for competency



Occupation title	Employment, 2019	Openings, projected 2019–29 annual average	Median annual wage, 2019[1]	Education typically required for entry	Work experience in a related occupation	On-the-job training typically required to attain competency
Farmers, ranchers, and other agricultural managers	952,300	80,900	$71,160	High school diploma or equivalent	5 years or more	None
Farmworkers and laborers, crop, nursery, and greenhouse	566,500	85,800	25,440	No formal educational credential	None	Short-term on-the-job training
Agricultural equipment operators	70,300	11,600	31,950	No formal educational credential	None	Moderate-term on-the-job training
First-line supervisors of farming, fishing, and forestry workers	53,200	6,900	48,280	High school diploma or equivalent	Less than 5 years	None
Farm equipment mechanics and service technicians	40,800	3,700	42,200	High school diploma or equivalent	None	Long-term on-the-job training
Graders and sorters, agricultural products	38,300	5,000	25,670	No formal educational credential	None	Short-term on-the-job training
Agricultural inspectors	15,200	2,200	45,490	Bachelor's degree	None	Moderate-term on-the-job training
Farm labor contractors	800	100	61,910	No formal educational credential	Less than 5 years	Short-term on-the-job training

[1] Wage data exclude self-employed workers.
Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS).

As table 1 shows, large occupations are projected to have more openings each year, on average, from 2019 to 2029. That's because openings in these occupations are projected to result from workers who leave permanently and need to be replaced, even if few openings arise from new jobs.

The education and training typically required to enter the occupation also varies. Of the occupations listed in table 1, typical entry-level education requirements range from no formal education to a bachelor's degree.

Five of the occupations in table 1 had a median annual wage higher than $39,810, the median annual wage for all occupations in 2019. And three of those occupations usually require work experience in a related occupation. On-the-job training typically required ranges from none for managerial and supervisory occupations to more than 12 months for mechanics and technicians.

...To the market

While farmworkers perform their duties, sales managers of farming companies contact buyers and purchasing agents. Farming sales managers may also sell their produce to wholesale businesses, whose sales representatives sell it to other customers. These buyers work for grocery stores, restaurants, and other businesses to purchase the fruits and vegetables they need for reselling to consumers.

Order fillers retrieve those customer orders and prepare them to be sent out. Shipping, receiving, and inventory clerks keep track of those purchases and record the incoming and outgoing shipments of produce.

Throughout the process of distributing and transporting these shipments, hand laborers and material movers manually transfer the produce to and from storage areas, loading docks, and delivery trucks. Delivery truck drivers and long-haul drivers transport the shipments to multiple locations before ultimately arriving at nearby stores or businesses. There, stockers record the number of fruits or vegetables received and inspect their condition so they can then be displayed for sale in the store.

Table 2 shows some of the occupations related to bringing fresh produce to markets. Half of the occupations had employment of more than 1 million across all industries in 2019. And in most of the occupations in table 2, projected annual average openings over the 2019–29 decade will result from a combination of new jobs and departing workers.

Table 2. Selected market-related occupations in supplying produce

Employment and wages, 2019; annual average openings, projected 2019–29; education typically required for entry; and on-the-job training typically required for competency

Occupation title	Employment, 2019	Openings, projected 2019–29 annual average	Median annual wage, 2019[1]	Education typically required for entry[2]	On-the-job training typically required to attain competency
Laborers and freight, stock, and material movers, hand	2,986,000	380,600	$29,510	No formal educational credential	Short-term on-the-job training
Stockers and order fillers	2,135,800	254,900	27,380	High school diploma or equivalent	Short-term on-the-job training
Heavy and tractor-trailer truck drivers	2,029,900	209,200	45,260	Postsecondary nondegree award	Short-term on-the-job training
Sales representatives, wholesale and manufacturing, except technical and scientific products	1,399,700	127,500	59,930	High school diploma or equivalent	Moderate-term on-the-job training
Light truck or delivery services drivers	1,018,600	111,800	34,730	High school diploma or equivalent	Short-term on-the-job training
Shipping, receiving, and inventory clerks	710,400	54,300	34,190	High school diploma or equivalent	Short-term on-the-job training
Driver/sales worker	487,400	51,300	25,860	High school diploma or equivalent	Short-term on-the-job training
Buyers and purchasing agents	449,300	36,000	64,380	Bachelor's degree	Moderate-term on-the-job training
Sales managers	433,800	35,300	126,640	Bachelor's degree	None

(1) Wage data exclude self-employed workers.
(2) In addition to education, sales managers typically need less than 5 years of work experience in a related occupation. All other occupations typically do not require experience to enter the occupation.
Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS).

Most of these occupations typically require at least a high school diploma or equivalent to enter the occupation. Four had median annual wages higher than the $39,810 median for all workers—and 3 of those 4 typically require postsecondary education.

Sales managers, the highest paying occupation in table 2, is the only occupation in the table that does not also typically require on-the-job training. However, it does typically require work experience in a related occupation, in addition to a college degree.

For more information

This article covers some of the many occupations involved in producing and supplying fresh fruits and vegetables. Additional occupations—such as agricultural engineers, agricultural and food scientists, and agricultural and food science technicians—focus on food production in different ways.

Learn about these and hundreds of other occupations in the Occupational Outlook Handbook (OOH). For each occupation, OOH profiles describe what workers do, what their job outlook is, how much they earn, and more.

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