

Full interview with Jack Ward from British Growers Association

How did the UK horticulture industry manage harvest labour during COVID-19 in the UK (what were some of the key challenges, how did they get addressed)?

In a normal season the UK fresh produce industry requirement for seasonal Labour would be around 70,000 for the complete season which runs pretty much over 12 months taking into account winter cropping. Our season starts with asparagus in late April and ends with a variety of brassica crops in the spring 12 months later. So, at the start of lockdown in March 2020 the UK was in relatively quiet in terms of its seasonal Labour requirements. However, the industry was very mindful that it is very reliant on migrant labour and in a normal year it would expect about 90% of the total seasonal labour requirement to come predominantly from Bulgaria and Romania. At the start of lockdown there were a combination of factors which came into play; the movement restrictions here in the UK; the regulations around social distancing and the difficulties of moving from country to country. Inevitably there were concerns from potential seasonal workers about leaving homes and families during a state of considerable uncertainty.

The industry was genuinely concerned about where its labour requirements would come from and recognised that numbers coming from Eastern Europe would be significantly down and the only option was to make up the shortfall with UK workers. Given the experiences of trying to recruit UK workers in previous years, the industry was not hopeful that recruiting local labour would be the solution. Up until the COVID crisis, the UK has enjoyed very high levels of employment and it has been extremely difficult to recruit people into seasonal harvest jobs. Generally, people living in the UK are looking for regular part time work or regular full-time work rather than seasonal work.

The industry recognised that the only way it was going to secure an adequate workforce was to recruit locally. The first organization to test the water was British Summer Fruits representing the Berry industry which employ the largest number of seasonal workers of any fresh produce category. Their requirement is probably for around 28,000 seasonal workers throughout the Berry season which runs from March through to November. British Summer Fruits set up its own recruitment page which is still on its website today- <https://www.britishsummerfruits.co.uk/jobs>. It is fairly basic but provided details of farms that were looking to employ seasonal labour through the season.

The industry also relies on commercial Labour providers to provide seasonal workers, and it has to be acknowledged that these companies which include two registered charities went into overdrive to recruit seasonal workers on behalf of The UK fresh produce industry- <https://www.concordiavolunteers.org.uk/feed-the-nation>.

There were also a number of initiatives to switch people from roles in construction, landscape gardening, the catering sector and even the horse racing industry into seasonal work. As an organisation we were inundated with offers of differing initiatives of varying levels of effectiveness. While we did our best to encourage all of them (or at least not put them off). I'm not sure how many of these initiatives delivered significant numbers of local seasonal workers to farms.

A lot of growers were inundated by requests from local people looking for work. In some instances this was successful but in other instances the expectations of people looking for work were significantly different to the work on offer. For example, some people offered to work two afternoons a week and a couple of hours in the morning because that was all they could manage with their childcare arrangements. This is not intended to be critical of these people it is just a reflection of what they're able to do in difficult circumstances.

In several cases large growers took it upon themselves to charter planes and bring workers over from Bulgaria and Romania. From a PR perspective this proved quite controversial and TV crews and reporters assembled at airports to report on the arrival of these people. The optics of these initiatives didn't look great from a PR perspective but from an employer perspective they did provide significant numbers of workers with experience of seasonal work.

One of the lines we were able to use with the media to explain why UK farms were bringing workers in from overseas was that they needed to balance locally recruited workforces that had never done this work before with returnees from Bulgaria and Romania. Growers have reported that people coming back year after year are anything up to 30% more efficient than someone who has never done this work before and this is a significant factor in terms of operating within tight commercial margins.

For the first few weeks of lockdown I, and other people in similar positions, spent hours responding to offers of help and requests for information, so we decided that it would be sensible to set up a single point of contact that we could direct people to including growers looking for seasonal workers and seasonal workers looking for jobs. This culminated in the creation of the Pick for Britain website. The site received massive numbers of hits. One point to bear in mind is the capacity of both the website and the industry to respond to significant levels of interest.

The Pick for Britain website crashed on several occasions as a result of the volume of hits. There was also quite a bit of criticism of growers for not responding to people expressing interest in jobs. This is quite an important point for growers to understand that if they go public with their recruitment, they need to have sufficient resources to respond. I know relatively small employers with very limited office resources received hundreds of requests which they simply could not deal with and this generated some adverse PR.

Another point worth bearing in mind is that having mounted this campaign to recruit local labour, the industry needed to demonstrate that it had actually employed local labour rather than preferring to wait for the possibility of workers coming from Bulgaria and Romania later in the season. I don't think it's any secret that some growers were quite public in their rejection of the use of UK workers and this was certainly picked up by the press and I was asked to comment on this point on numerous occasions

If you are going to recruit local Labour, you might want to gather evidence of the numbers employed locally so you can demonstrate that jobs are being offered to local people in preference to people from other countries. Obviously, I don't know how sensitive this issue is in Australia, but it proved to be quite a sensitive issue here in the UK. I had a number of difficult conversations with the press about the perceived preference for overseas labour versus UK Labour on the basis that people from the UK weren't considered suitable by some growers to do seasonal work despite the mounting numbers on the UK furlough scheme or losing their jobs altogether.

It must be acknowledged that we received very good support from the Secretary of State at Defra who as a former strawberry grower understands and appreciates the importance of seasonal Labour. Defra were particularly helpful at negotiating concessions, particularly on quarantine regulations for seasonal labour. And throughout the imposition of restrictions and COVID regulations, Defra were quick to point out to other government departments the specific needs of the fresh produce industry. I don't think we got everything we asked for but on balance they were very helpful.

The Secretary of State also organised industry meetings which he chaired to discuss the seasonal Labour situation. So in terms of contact with government, we could not have wished for better access to those at the heart of government.

Does the UK have any advice for Australian growers in how they can prepare for the upcoming harvest season given there could be a shortage of overseas workers which the industry relies heavily on?

From a grower perspective the key issues will be how to operate a business successfully under whatever restrictions apply, particularly on social distancing. For some employers these proved particularly problematic on accommodation where historically seasonal workers shared accommodation in caravans.

The UK has had a couple of outbreaks on farms which have been reported in the press but given the numbers employed on farms through the season and the movement of people, the industry has done amazingly well to get by with very limited outbreaks.

An important point is to be on top of what's happening. There has been a massive amount of press interest in the whole seasonal Labour issue here in the UK and one of the keys to being able to successfully manage the PR has been a good understanding of what's happening at the farm level.

Do you have any good news stories of positives that have come out of the pandemic?

As you can imagine there have been a few disaster stories where locals have been employed and there have been some tales of heroics. A lot of these are anecdotal but I think it's reasonably fair to say that quite a few growers have been impressed by the calibre of workers that have been recruited locally and it has gone some way to dispelling some of the myths about the willingness of UK citizens to carry out seasonal work.

Please take a look at this YouTube clip:

<https://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=picking+asparagus+in+lockdown&docid=608007183926035596&mid=43E78CB7559F2858FD8C43E78CB7559F2858FD8C&view=detail&FORM=VIRE>

Is there anything you would like to know from the Australian growers' perspective?

I often wonder whether we could get growers from the southern hemisphere to participate in meetings with growers from the northern hemisphere through the wonders of zoom. In my experience, growers are always keen to speak to other growers particularly in other parts of the world who face similar or different problems. Now that we are all much more adept at using technology, we might be able to make this happen.