

HAITIAN FARMWORKERS

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"They're the best workers I've ever had."

"I'll never hire one of them again."

These two comments reflect the different experiences of two employers during the 1982 harvest with their Haitian employees. Approximately 500 Haitians picked apples in Wayne County last year and some people predicted larger numbers this year.

Understanding the life, beliefs, and experiences of your Haitian employees can make their employment a good experience for both of you. Haitians have been coming to the U.S. for years and many live here as visitors or permanent residents. Since 1980, large numbers of poor Haitians fled to the U.S. seeking political assylum. This group is entering agricultural work by joining crews in Florida. The U.S. government has not yet decided if they are refugees and has only granted them "entrant" status. They can live and work here until their status is determined.

The following are generalities I think we can safely make about this particular group of people.

. Haitians are highly motivated, hard working employees. They want desperately to earn money for their families and to make a life for themselves here. They are usually the first workers in the fields in the morning and they work hard. In our English classes they always ask for more work and for more classes.

. Haitians are ambitious. They have goals for themselves. This has been demonstrated by the courage and perseverance they have to risk their lives to come on the dangerous journey to the U.S. Many people drowned or were killed enroute. The Department of Labor reports that some Haitians are already becoming contractors and forming work crews.

. Haitians need extra training. Many Haitians would not have seen an apple before coming to the U.S. Apples are a delicacy of the rich in Haiti. Your employees will not be able to distinguish between varieties or tell a good apple from a bruised apple without extra training. They will learn this skill quickly but you must take the time to teach them. A Haitian could probably sort 15 different varieties of bananas, or sort for "good" bananas; I could not do it without instruction. Our skills are dependent on our experiences.

. Haitians are religious. Over 90% are Catholic. Many Haitians refuse to work on Sunday. In Haiti all stores, business, and places of work close on Sunday. Haitians also believe in Voodoo which is a mixture of African and Western religious beliefs. The Haitian's belief in Voodoo is usually negatively dramatized by our media, and misconceptions about Voodoo have sometimes caused problems with other workers. Voodoo is usually a positive force in the Haitians' lives and the healing sought from a Voodoo priest or priestess was often the only source of treatment in a country where medical care is available only to the rich.

. Haitians are proud. They will quickly take offense if treated as children or looked down on. They are in a new land with a new language and customs to learn, but they have made a long journey and are capable of taking care of themselves. They will readily make their opinions known.

. Haitians are independent. In Haiti most people subsisted by doing odd jobs; creating crafts with their own hands and selling them; or by raising sparse crops and selling them. They worked for themselves and were their own bosses. Your best approach is to instruct the workers, and give constructive criticism when needed.

If you would like more information on the Haitian culture, two publications are available from this office.

