

Bumper British strawberry crop may rot as EU pickers stay away


Fruit farmers fear loss of summer workers to higher wages in Germany and Romania.

First, the good news: Britain's love affair with the strawberry remains undimmed. And thanks to the good weather earlier in the spring, this year's crop arrived some two weeks ahead of schedule.

But while there appears to be sufficient numbers of workers to pick the berries at the start of this potentially bumper season, whether they will be here at its end is becoming a key concern for the nation's fruit farmers.

With growers across Europe competing for labour, eastern European workers – who comprise the vast majority of Britain's fruit pickers – now find themselves in the driving seat. Farms have started poaching pickers from each other. "What we are seeing for the first time is that workers are coming over and moving on to another farm shortly after arriving," said Stephanie Maurel, chief executive of Concordia, one of the largest providers of labour. "If we bring over 100 workers for a farm and 10 go elsewhere, that's going to create a lot of shortages."

This year Germany has introduced new tax incentives for foreign workers which has led to fears that many Romanians may turn their back on British farms, having provided the majority of its fruit pickers in recent years. "We've always competed with Germany but the UK has been more attractive – we have table-top, off-the-ground production. In Germany a lot of picking is done on your knees," said Nicholas Marston, chairman of trade body British Summer Fruits. "A lot of the crop is not covered in Germany. If it rains, you don't get any work so in the past the UK has been seen as a more attractive place to come. But now the competition for people right across Europe is hotting up."



The fallout from Brexit, which has left many eastern European workers feeling that they are more welcome in other European member states, is also a concern. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs recently provided them with brochures in Romanian and Bulgarian declaring that the UK is open to foreign workers.

But an expanding Romanian economy has seen fewer workers leave their home. A sizable drop in the number of workers returning year on year has also become apparent in figures collated by the NFU.

“Workers from Romania are no longer earning six times what they would back home,” Maurel said. “It’s more like three and a half times. That makes a difference.”

It is predicted that apple growers will be worse hit by the labour shortage than berry growers as they will need fruit pickers in the late autumn, when many Romanians choose to return home having earned the maximum they can make before paying tax.

“In terms of workers from the EEA, there is still a relative shortage across the whole of European horticulture,” Marston said. “So farmers have been working very hard to make sure their farms are attractive to workers with better rates of pay, bonuses and more attractive accommodation. The great majority of farms have enough people for the start of the season but there is a concern that most Romanian workers only stay for a period of time and, once we get into the late summer, there will be the same levels of shortages as for the last two years of 10% to 15% and perhaps 30% on some farms.” The Home Office estimates around 80,000 positions will need to be filled by foreign workers on the UK’s fruit farms this year. Anticipating problems after talking to fruit growers, the government has allowed in 2,500 workers predominantly from Russia, Ukraine and Moldova as part of a pilot project but this is only around a quarter of the minimum that producers think is needed. Several EU member states go further afield for labour. Spain’s agricultural sector employs a large number of Moroccans while Germany employs 60,000 Ukrainians to work in its fields.

Marston predicted that the UK would one day follow suit. “We, like other sectors in the food industry, will have to start looking outside the European area for staff.”

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<https://www.theguardian.com/business/2019/may/04/shortage-fruit-pickers-britain-compete-germany>

