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Brits don't want to work on farms – so who will pick fruit after Brexit?

Just one per cent of seasonal farm workers are British. Most currently come from Eastern Europe, but with the end of free movement, British growers could have to look even further for labour

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After a dozen futile calls to big farms, agricultural lobbyists and labour contractors, we finally found him. The rarest of the rare, the British berry picker.

Meet Max Hughes, a 20-year-old university student and history major, who is spending his summer harvesting blackcurrants at the Snell family farm in Herefordshire. He rides in the back of a harvester all day, standing beside a Czech migrant and a couple of sun-bronzed Romanian guys, who know very little English.

British fruit farmer cuts hundreds of jobs over Brexit uncertainty

“No matter, you can't hear a thing they say over the noise,” Hughes says, gesturing towards the wheeled harvester beside him. Its vibrating metal fingers shake the currant bushes and bring the tart berries via conveyor belt to the sorting table, where Hughes and his teammates discard the leaves, twigs, slugs and occasional mouse – whatever you don't want to see in a frozen fruit pack.

Britain today is completely dependent on foreign workers to pick its fruit and vegetables. According to the National Farmers Union, an industry lobbying group, of the 60,000 seasonal workers in the fields last year picking fruit and vegetables, barely one per cent was British. The vast majority come from Eastern Europe, particularly Bulgaria and Romania.

As long as Britain has remained part of the European Union, by treaty its doors have been wide open to the “free movement” of fellow members, including those seasonal farmworkers who come for four or five months, get paid in British pounds and return home for the winter.

But as Britain prepares to leave the EU, bringing the era of free movement to a close, farmers have begun to panic: Who will pick the crops next spring?

Yet critics of Brexit argue that Britain desperately needs foreign workers – not only “the best and brightest” in finance, tech and medicine, who May promises will still be welcome, but those who clean hotel rooms in Brighton, man kitchens in London and harvest tomatoes in Norfolk.

If far fewer workers come from Europe, those jobs will have to be filled by Brits – who don't seem very keen, truth be told – or contracted from Belarus or Nepal or the Philippines.

Britain had such a foreign farmworker scheme in the past, but it was scrapped – and now there are growing calls to restart it.

Stephanie Maurel, the chief executive of Concordia, a recruitment company that supplies workers to about 200 British farms, says they've had virtually zero Brits apply.

“We've had two applications out of 10,000,” she says. “It's statistically quite damning.”

Asked why Brits aren't high on the work, she recited the list: early hours, long days, physical toll, seasonality, lack of affordable transport, “and, quite simply, the farms aren't in places with high levels of unemployment.”

And, unless you're a local, you live in a trailer. Often a nice trailer, with wifi, but still.

Maurel says some Brits work in less taxing farm jobs – as logistics managers or office staff – but even those higher paying, indoor jobs are mostly taken by Eastern Europeans these days.

She says the rare British workers who give the fruit and vegetable harvest a try, “literally don't last a week”.

Hughes and three other university students are the only Brits harvesting berries at the Snell family farm this summer, out of a workforce of 300.

“That's quite something, isn't it?” says Christine Snell who owns the award-winning, environmentally sensitive farm with her husband, Anthony. “We want to get the message across: If we could recruit British workers, we would, but we cannot.”

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