

Workers at Swanton Berry Farm

Jim Cochran

Owner, Swanton Berry Farms



The dignity of farm labor was a founding principle of Swanton Berry Farm. We wanted to present our customers with a product, which was not produced at the expense of the workers' health or dignity. What would be the point of farming organically if the workers were underpaid, over-worked, or treated without respect? Just carrying the 'organic' label did not address any of these issues.

The simple fact of offering a chemical-free work environment was a first step. But there are many more factors, which go into creating a good work environment. We are proud that Swanton Berry Farm is the first strawberry farm (and the first organic farm) in the US to sign a contract with the United Farm Workers of America/AFL-CIO. The Unionization of our employees gives them the ability to sit across the table with management and discuss issues as equals--co-partners in our joint effort to produce the best strawberries available anywhere.



And it gives them the best pay scale in the industry, medical and dental plans, a retirement plan, vacation and holiday pay. This package raises the cost of our strawberries, but we feel that our customers are happy to pay a little more knowing that our workers are treated fairly.



The Union label is your assurance that the food you are eating is produced under the best working conditions.



Additionally, we pay at an hourly rate (rather than a piece rate) so that people don't scramble so fast that they do permanent damage to their bodies in the rush to make a few more dollars in the day. We give unlimited time off for employees to take care of their children's needs. During any given day, one or two or three employees will leave for a while to take care of some family business.

Doing the same task over and over again is not only boring, but can be physically harmful. Since we grow a number of different crops, we can offer some variety in work tasks during a given week. A typical workweek will involve strawberry picking, weeding, and harvest of vegetables.

And, we try to have a good time! While farm work is hard work, it is made easier by good companionship and good humor.



We show our appreciation for good work by passing on the compliments of our customers. We recognize the fact that everything we do springs from work done in the field. We involve as many employees as possible in the decision-making process. And we try to share as much information as possible with employees. Farm work at Swanton Berry Farm is an intellectual as well as physical process. We depend on the ideas and observations of all employees. It takes a bit longer to do things when you ask several opinions about what should be done next, but in the end, we make better decisions.



We treat our employees as professionals, not cogs in a “food machine.”