

# Work in the Orchards of Eastern Washington

Right now workers are pruning the trees, lopping and sawing off particular branches. This work begins in November and continues through March. This is hard, demanding work standing on sometimes icy ladders, often in snowy orchards. Workers typically receive \$5.00 to \$6.00 an hour for pruning or they are paid by the tree, \$1.00- \$3.00, depending on the size of the trees. Workers must provide their own tools, boots, and gloves.

From June into mid July, the fruit needs thinning so that the remaining apples reach larger sizes and obtain good color. Workers on ladders must carefully pluck certain apples in each cluster, without damaging the fruit chosen to remain. Large crews of men and women often work without enough toilets, hand washing facilities, or drinking water and sometimes amid pesticide drift from nearby orchards. Sometimes women may face sexual discrimination in hiring. Pay for thinning is about \$5.00-\$6.00 per hour.

The apple harvest begins in late August for the early varieties such as Gala and continues into mid September for Granny Smith and Fuji. Workers normally pick quickly with both hands from a ladder into a canvas bag strapped to their chest that weighs about 40 pounds when full. They go down the ladder 25-40 times with full bags to fill a wooden bin, 4ft x 4ft x 4ft. Each bin weighs about 1000 lbs. Picking the trees clean, an average worker may pick 8 bins per day of the harder varieties. This means the worker has moved 6000-8000 pounds of fruit on his/her back from the tree to the bin. For harder apples, like Red Delicious, workers usually get \$8-\$11 per bin. Workers report that these piece rates have not changed for over 10 years.

Softer, more delicate varieties, like Goldens, Granny Smith, and Galas, require the workers to pick more slowly with careful handling to avoid bruising. Fuji apple stems must be cut with small hand cutters so that the stem does not pierce the other apples in the bag or bin. With the more careful handling requirements, a worker may only pick 5 bins a day. Reported piece rates for these more delicate apples ranges widely from \$10 to over \$25 per bin.

Apple pickers experience injuries falling from ladders or back problems from moving many thousands of pounds of apples per day. There is no overtime pay in the orchards and during the peak season workers may pick 10 hours a day seven days a week.