

TEACHING TOLERANCE



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MIDDLE & UPPER GRADES ACTIVITY

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Grapes

Virtually all of the country's table grapes, and 90 percent of its wine, comes from California, which boasts 1 million acres of vineyards. Forty-eight percent of this acreage is used for wine, 40 percent for raisins and 12 percent for table grapes.

Grapevines require delicate handiwork. Several times a year, they are tied, trained and trimmed to expose grapes to both breezes and sun.

The August-September harvest is a stressful, backbreaking race against rot and rain as table grapes, handled like china, are rushed to market and raisin grapes are dried on paper on the ground. The single most labor-intensive activity in U.S. agriculture is the harvesting of 250,000 acres of raisin grapes near Fresno, a job involving some 30,000 workers.

After harvest, workers prune 80 percent of the vine back, leaving just enough shoots and buds to optimize grape production year after year.

Workers contend with horrendous cold or heat, accidents, a lack of water and shade, and exposure to pesticides. In 2008, a pregnant teenager and a 37-year-old man died of heat stroke while working in vineyards in California's San Joaquin Valley.

Cristina, an immigrant from Mexico, worked seven days a week. The work was grueling, the pace unrelenting. There were few breaks. Mornings could be cold and afternoons blazing hot. She had little protection from the elements.

After the first 12-hour day, Cristina cried. "I didn't think I could make it." But she had little choice but to return to the fields. When payday came, Cristina was told there was no money for her—that she was working to pay off the expense incurred by those who had brought her to the United States.

Because undocumented workers fear being deported, they accept what they can get for their labor. When pruning, they are paid by the "piece"—13 cents per pruned point. "To earn \$80 or \$90 a day, you have to do 500," said Isabel, 39, a Mexican worker. Harvesters earn 1 to 5 cents per pound for grape clusters that sell in grocery stores for \$1.40.

The result of the backbreaking, low-paying labor that women like Isabel and Cristina do, is that, in the California vineyards, pay has dropped to about \$5 an hour, far below California's minimum wage of \$8.