

Tomatoes

Arriving on supermarket shelves during the coldest days of the year, year-round tomatoes are an affordable luxury that Americans take for granted. Each year, we eat 20 pounds per person.

In Florida, the country's largest producer of fresh-market tomatoes, each tomato is tended by farmworkers like Delfina, Maria, Teresa and Josefina. Each one takes three months of sweaty, exhausting work in fields covered with poisons. From planting to harvest, day after sunny day, these women toil under dark shadows of exploitation and fear.

More than 33,000 farmworkers, almost all of them undocumented Latinos, produce Florida's annual crop of 1 billion pounds of fresh-market tomatoes, a crop whose wholesale value exceeds \$619 million.

The itinerant farmworker makes this all possible. But for every dollar we spend on a supermarket tomato, the field worker who picks it gets just 1 cent.

Tomatoes are grown on 31,000 acres in south Florida. As seeds are sprouted in greenhouses, workers on foot and on tractor plow narrow, raised beds saturated with fumigants that kill everything in the sandy soil. The beds are covered with plastic sheets, and holes are punched 18 to 30 inches apart. Workers then walk the rows, planting 4,000 seedlings per acre. Four-foot stakes are driven between the plants.

A month later, workers prune and tie every plant to twine that is stretched between the stakes. As the plant grows, the twine is adjusted to keep the plant upright and the new tomatoes off the ground.

Over three months, Florida tomato plants and soil are sprayed or dusted with as many as 72 different pesticides. At 217 pounds per acre, this is the greatest use of pesticides in U.S. farming. Applied by tractor and hand-held sprayers, the poisons keep the tomatoes free of bugs, diseases and blemishes.

Warnings, protective clothing, washing water and bilingual safety instructions are required, but the rules are often ignored and workers are often exposed while in the fields. They work despite headaches, rashes and vomiting—afraid of losing their meager pay.

The harvest is a frenetic race to handpick the tomatoes and get them to the markets. Farmworkers fill a large plastic bucket with 32 pounds of tomatoes and run with it to a truck, where it is dumped into large boxes. For each 32-pound bucket, the worker gets 45 to 50 cents, a wage unchanged in the last 30 years. A worker typically fills 100 to 150 buckets a day, earning a "piece-rate" wage of \$45 to \$75 per day.

For all their labors, Florida tomato workers live in poverty. They have no job protections. They get no vacation or sick days. Few have health insurance. They reside in temporary, crowded, migrant camps or rundown trailers, shacks and tenement apartments. If they have legal immigration status, they are eligible for food stamps, Medicaid and other programs for the poor—but the vast majority are not.

Soon after crossing into the United States in 1998, Maria found herself planting tomatoes in Florida, the country's leading producer of fresh tomatoes. The 30-year-old Guatemalan with four children once did the difficult work of cleaning hotels in Mexico, but she never worked as hard as she did in the tomato fields.

On her first 12-hour work day, "I cried because I didn't think I'd make it. Your head hurts because of the [pesticide] spray, your back hurts."

When working by the hour, Maria says she typically earns \$5.75. When working by contract—during harvest, for example—she earns 45 cents for every 32-pound bucket she fills with tomatoes. Racing to make as much money as possible, like many of the more than 33,000 farmworkers toiling in Florida's tomato fields, Maria runs back and forth, filling her bucket and dumping the load onto a nearby truck.

"You have to run to do 150 [buckets] to make your money for the day."

That is, when the bosses actually pay.

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When not battling the heat, the physical demands and the persistent sexual harassment in the fields, Maria has had to worry if, at the end of a work week, she has given away her labor for nothing.

Of one boss, she says, “He doesn’t let you go to the bathroom, and if you do, he yells at you.”

After putting in two weeks of work, the boss told the workers there was no money to pay them. Somewhere in America, someone probably paid the full price for the tomatoes Maria picked. But she received nothing. And there was nothing she could do.

This winter, Maria and the other women farmworkers will be back in Florida’s fields, growing tomatoes for America.

When you buy one, remember them.