

California Farmworker Day

By

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California Farmworker Day, observed annually on August 26, is a statewide day of recognition honoring the essential contributions of California's agricultural labor force. The observance was formally established through Senate Bill 721 in 2021, authored by Senator Ben Hueso, which designated the date and directed the Governor to issue an annual proclamation recognizing the vital role of farm workers in planting, harvesting, tending, and preparing crops for market. The bill emphasized California's leadership in agricultural production and highlighted the often-unrecognized labor that sustains the state's economy and food system.

Since the creation of this observance, California governors have issued annual proclamations honoring farm workers, most notably Governor Gavin Newsom. In both 2024 and 2025, Newsom's proclamations emphasized the essential contributions of farm workers across the state, describing them as the backbone of California's agriculture and reaffirming the state's commitment to improving conditions, access to resources, and labor protections.

The establishment of this commemorative day is closely tied to the broader history of the farmworker movement in California. Leaders such as César Chávez, Dolores Huerta, and Larry Itliong paved the way for labor protections, collective-bargaining rights, and improved working conditions for agricultural laborers. Their efforts shaped modern awareness of farmworker challenges, many of which persist today, including long hours, seasonal instability, and exposure to environmental hazards. California's proclamations for Farmworker Day also reflect ongoing state efforts to support farm workers. Initiatives include expanded housing programs, job-training pathways, labor-rights enforcement, and improved access to healthcare. Resource centers provide language support and tenant assistance, helping farmworker communities navigate essential public systems.

Santa Clara County's agricultural roots extend far beyond ranching and cattle. Historically called the "Valley of Heart's Delight," the county became one of California's most productive orchard regions. By the early 20th century, vast tracts were dedicated to prunes, apricots, peaches, cherries, and apples. Fruit orchards proliferated, canneries and drying facilities were established, and Italian, French, and other immigrant families contributed expertise in tree fruit cultivation. Other agricultural products were also grown, including tobacco, vegetables, and grains. By the late 19th century, specialty tree crops

had replaced grain as the most profitable land use. These orchards and crops were labor-intensive, requiring skilled workers for planting, pruning, harvesting, and processing roles historically filled by migrant farmworkers and immigrant laborers.

Gilroy, in southern Santa Clara County, has a unique and well-documented farming history. Early settlers cultivated livestock, grains, and orchards, but it was the arrival of Italian immigrants in the late 19th and early 20th centuries that significantly shaped Gilroy's agricultural identity. They introduced stone fruits such as prunes, apricots, and cherries, as well as vegetables like tomatoes, peppers, and onions. Japanese immigrants also contributed to early garlic production, which would later become Gilroy's signature crop. By the mid-20th century, Gilroy had become synonymous with garlic production, earning the nickname the "Garlic Capital of the World." The Christopher Ranch, founded in 1956, expanded commercial garlic cultivation and distribution. The city celebrates this identity with the Gilroy Garlic Festival, first held in 1979, which honors local farmers and draws attention to the region's agricultural heritage.

Gilroy's history also included extensive orchards, particularly prunes, cherries, and apricots, as well as experimental crops like tobacco in smaller plots. These crops were harvested and processed using labor-intensive methods, employing farm workers from both local communities and migrant labor programs. The city's orchards were complemented by dairies and livestock operations, reflecting a diversified agricultural economy that sustained both the local population and broader markets. A significant figure in Gilroy's agricultural development was Henry Miller, the "Cattle King," who acquired large tracts of land in the area, including Bloomfield Ranch and Glen Ranch. Initially focused on cattle, Miller later cultivated orchards of prunes and apricots and supported infrastructure such as irrigation projects. His Miller Red Barn, built in 1891, remains a historic symbol of this transition from ranching to orchard farming, preserving a tangible connection to Gilroy's agricultural past. Even after Miller's death in 1916, his lands were increasingly used for fruit cultivation, helping shape the modern agricultural identity of Gilroy. Over time, garlic, stone fruits, and other crops became the backbone of the local economy, with farmworkers playing essential roles in cultivation, harvesting, and processing.

The fruits, vegetables, and other crops grown in Santa Clara County and Gilroy continue to have a tangible impact on local communities. Fresh garlic, prunes, stone fruits, and locally grown vegetables are sold at farmers' markets, used in local restaurants, and distributed through community-supported agriculture programs. These products not only provide nutritious food for residents but also sustain the local economy and keep small farms operational. Farmworkers are central to this system, ensuring that they

produce moves from fields to kitchens, grocery stores, and community tables. Schools, community centers, and nonprofits often host programs that highlight the importance of locally grown food, encouraging residents to support local agriculture. Farmers' markets in San José, Gilroy, and surrounding towns provide access to seasonal produce, while also celebrating the cultural and labor heritage of farmworkers who have maintained these crops for generations.

California Farmworker Day has been recognized in multiple ways across the state. Governors' proclamations serve as formal acknowledgment, with Governor Newsom issuing statements in 2024 and 2025 praising farm workers' resilience and contributions. The California Department of Food and Agriculture has celebrated the day with blog posts and video messages expressing gratitude. Community-based events, such as the Farmworker Appreciation Day & Resource Fair in Mendota and the Annual Farmworkers Appreciation Breakfast in Calxico, highlight services and recognition. Local organizations, including the Napa Valley Farmworker Foundation, host *Día de la Familia*, a festival featuring health screenings, cultural programming, and family activities celebrating farmworker communities.

Despite Santa Clara County's urbanization and technology focus, it retains deep agricultural roots. Historic orchards, garlic farms, and the preservation of landmarks like the Miller Red Barn provide tangible links to the past. Educational programs, cultural events, and community recognition initiatives help residents understand and honor the contributions of farm workers, both historically and in the present day. Observing California Farmworker Day allows reflection on the human labor that sustains agriculture not only in California's large agricultural regions but also in counties like Santa Clara, where orchards, prunes, garlic, and other crops continue to nourish local communities. By celebrating farm workers each August 26, the state honors their contributions while recognizing the historical agricultural legacy of regions such as Gilroy and the broader Santa Clara Valley.