

ON THE
SCARCITY OF HOME-GROWN FRUITS IN GREAT
BRITAIN; WITH REMEDIAL SUGGESTIONS.

By C. Roach Smith, F.S.A. &c.

[In a Letter to Joseph Mayer, F.S.A. &c., Vice-President.]

(READ 7TH MAY, 1863.)

MY DEAR SIR,

Since I have resided in the country I have been led to consider a fact which does not appear to have excited the attention of the public, although it is one of great importance, affecting the health and comfort of the great majority of the population; indeed, it may be said, of almost the whole of the working classes and particularly of those residing in towns. It is *the great scarcity and consequent high price of fruit*. I have been at some pains to ascertain the nature of the food which supplies the daily wants of the cottager, of the townsman, of our soldiers and of our sailors; and I am well convinced that, in a sanitary point of view, the day is not far distant when the Government will feel bound to make inquiry and help to remedy an evil the effects of which may be most disastrous.

Nature intended that fruit and vegetables should constitute at least the chief support of man. They are indispensable to his healthful existence, as may be proved and is yearly strikingly proved, by depriving ships' crews of this species of food. Some years since the boys in Christ's Hospital were so infected with cutaneous diseases that they were compelled to be sent home; and so general and bad was the malady that a medical

inquiry was instituted. The evil was proved to have resulted from the want of fruit and vegetable diet. Now if a school such as this, richly endowed and watched over, is liable to be infected with loathsome disease from the absence of natural food, can we be surprised that millions of our fellow-creatures, steeped in poverty and ignorance and of improvident habits, are the victims of a neglect or misunderstanding of one of nature's primary laws ?

That my remarks may not take a discursive range, or seem indefinite, I will limit them to one or two of the main fruits which should be upon every poor man's table ; but which have become so scarce and expensive that they are almost luxuries upon the tables of the rich. First of all stands The Apple. We learn from Solinus that Apples were, in his time, so common in Thule* (Shetland) as to constitute the chief winter food of the people. But, at the present day, how many of the Irish have ever seen an Apple-pudding ? Even in Kent (a reputed fruit county), it is nothing uncommon to find Apples towards the month of January fetching from 2s. to 3s. a gallon ; and I have known them supplied to a nobleman's family in the spring, at the rate of from 4d. to 6d. per Apple ! Now the climate of Ireland is not worse than it was in the time of the Romans. Britain seemed then, much as we find it, always covered with fogs ; but Apples grew abundantly ; and would flourish much more plentifully now, because a wide extent of waste land has been brought into a state of cultivation ; and we will admit there is more horticultural science.

Am I attaching too much importance to the Apple ? Produce it upon the dinner table in any shape, and nine hundred

* Thyle larga est, et diutina, pomorum copiosa. Qui illic habitant, principio veris inter pecudes pabulis vivunt, et lacte in hyeme compergunt arborum fructibus. Cap. 35, edit. Ven. 1473. See Mr. Hogg's remarks on this passage in his Paper on Iceland, printed in "The Transactions of the Royal Society of Literature," vol. vi, p. 324 *et seq.* The "ultima Thule" of the Romans was probably Mainland, the chief of the Shetland Islands.

and ninety-nine in a thousand will devour it with avidity. Of all fruits it is, perhaps, the most valuable. It is extremely wholesome : less than any it tires the appetite, for it may be served daily and be ever acceptable. Yet it has become a forbidden fruit not only to the Irish, but to the great mass of the English : so far as I have been able to learn it never finds a place upon the board of thousands of families even in the country ; and, of course, of tens of thousands in towns ; and it is never supplied to our soldiers and sailors.

I have referred to Solinus to shew the abundance of Apples in *Ultima Thule*. If they were so common in the north, it may be inferred they were equally so in other parts of Britain. That they were cultivated everywhere in the middle ages there can be no doubt. Brand's "Popular Antiquities" contains an immense number of references to the Apple. The old custom of "wassailing" the Apple trees at Christmas to make them fruitful (a relic of pagan superstition) was universal throughout England and is not yet quite extinct. But the trees no longer exist to be "wassailed." Even within our memory, where large orchards were cultivated we see now only a few old, cankered stumps, producing nothing and cumbering the ground. From some cause or other the general cultivation of this valuable fruit has become more and more neglected, while the population has gone on rapidly doubling and re-doubling itself.

It is true the science of Horticulture has given us a wonderful variety of Apples ; and we know, perhaps, better than our ancestors how to produce and manage the choicer kinds expeditiously and in little space : Mr. Rivers tells us how to grow them upon pyramids and dwarf bushes as thick in beds as gooseberry and currant trees. But these blessings are not for the million, although they could be supplied, without difficulty, with Apples equally valuable and easily attainable at a very cheap price.

for fruit trees I pointed out to him. He met my persuasion with the common objection, a fear of stealing. I observed, "your boys must eat something; let them steal: or consider the fruit their own; and, if you want any, get up in the morning early and steal from them." But, where such large quantities of fruit as I contemplate would be grown, stealing to any extent need not be apprehended. How is it that in France we see the roadsides for miles lined with Apple trees? Is it that the French are more honest than we? If so, let us endeavour to rise to their standard of honesty.

The French not only grow large quantities of Apples, upon which the working classes feed to an extent quite unsuspected in our country; but they export to England the main portion of what comes into the public markets.*

Before I leave the Apple let me give you the result of my experiments on the keeping of this useful fruit. I am not aware that similar experiments have been made and published. The Apples are allowed, generally, to hang too long upon the trees. The ripening of every kind should be anticipated; the fruit should be gathered before the ripening commences; and this process should be allowed to take place in a dry cellar, from which the light is excluded. Guided by this sure and simple rule, I have preserved Apples in perfection many

* "I have this evening, 20th Nov., 1815, passed through Covent Garden, and seen upwards of 1,000 casks of Apples that have been imported from France; and not less than an equal quantity heaped together in warehouses near Fleet Market, containing in the whole not less than 40,000 bushels. The fruit itself consists of fine specimens of several varieties, which appear with us nearly extinct, and these are grown mostly on the opposite coast to this country; and as there must be some cause for the abundant crop in that country in a season when we have scarcely any, would it not be advisable for our agricultural societies to send over some intelligent person to inspect the nature of the orchards in that country; and, if possible, endeavour to ascertain in what the difference of culture consists? Some writer on agriculture, I think Mr. Young, recommends to young farmers, at certain seasons to 'take their nags and see what their neighbours are about.' Would it not be equally prudent for the growers of fruit here to endeavour to find out what their rivals on the other side of the channel are doing? The fruit I have this evening seen is, at a moderate calculation, worth twenty thousand pounds, at the price it is selling for in the London markets."—*Hints addressed to Proprietors of Orchards etc.*, by William Salisbury. London, 1816.

months after my neighbours' heavier crops, allowed to ripen on the trees, have rotted.

The Pear will, probably, ever remain a luxury. It demands more attention than the Apple. There is an old proverb which, to a certain extent, correctly shews the tardiness with which the Pear tree comes into bearing :—

“ He who plants Pears
Plants for his heirs.”

Now this is true as regards some varieties of the Pear, if left to themselves ; but we may plant and have fruit too with perfect safety ; and whereas it has been stated that a *seedling* Pear tree may be expected to bear some time in the course of half a century, I have one which, although only five years old, is shewing a promise of fruit buds for 1864. I reversed the order of nature ; and instead of allowing it to stand still and take its own time, I moved it yearly and restrained its roots by pruning.

Next to the Apple I place the Vine, a tree but little understood, although, like the Apple, it might be made a national benefit. There is a general belief that the Vine can only be made to ripen its fruit in hot-houses and green-houses ; and so prevalent is this notion, that a Vine on the open wall, properly pruned, is seldom to be seen. People cheat themselves into error ; and imagining that their convictions are based on reasoning, give themselves no further concern and sit down in contented despondency. Our forefathers knew better (as I am attempting to show in my “*Collectanea Antiqua*”) : they actually made the Vine productive as a standard in the open ; and this to a much greater extent than people suppose, or are willing to believe ; for the mode of culture which our ancestors adopted is now unknown ; and people, seeing the Vine constantly fail upon walls, erroneously conclude that it cannot succeed under less favourable circumstances. For fail it will, both upon walls and as a standard in the open, unless

what may be called its physiology be studied and understood. When this is comprehended we may make sure of securing an abundance of its delicious fruit every year without any expense or trouble. I say yearly, because such a season as that of 1860 only comes once in a man's life; and experience and a close study of the capabilities of the Vine in the open air prove that what is commonly called "a grape season" is but little better than an excuse for ignorance or want of industry. How far north the Vine can be made productive upon open walls is yet to be ascertained. Mr. Hoare considers as far as the fifty-fourth parallel of latitude; "and even beyond that in favourable seasons:" up to this point he concludes that, by good culture, a crop may be depended upon yearly.* Although failure does not invariably follow bad management, yet it must be confessed that, in our climate, to ensure constant success scientific culture of the Vine is indispensable. The knowledge required is so simple, the leading principles by which the pruner must be guided are so few and so clear, that the whole art may be attained by a few hours' study. On every foot of wall, except such as face the north, it is possible to grow a pound of grapes; and it will therefore be obvious how great would be the produce were only one quarter of the unoccupied walls of our houses, cottages and gardens stocked with this prolific and valuable tree. The above-quoted writer asserts "that the surface of "the walls of every cottage of a medium size, that is applicable "to the training of Vines, is capable of producing, annually, "as many grapes as would be worth half the amount of its "rental." The Grapes, besides forming a daily dessert for months, make an excellent wine, even when unripe; and so do the young shoots, tendrils and leaves which, in large quantities, are taken from the Vines in the summer pruning. By the addi-

* A Practical Treatise on the Cultivation of the Grape Vine on open walls; by Clement Hoare, 3rd edition. London: Longmans, 1841.

tion of water and more or less sugar wines may be made so closely resembling those of Champagne and Anjou in France and the dry Rhenish wines that, at a most trifling cost, what is now the refuse of the Vine may be converted into a wholesome and cheering beverage, no longer to be restricted to the table of the rich but attainable by all.

A productive Vine is now a rarity. Probably on an average there is not one to every 500 houses: I even think we may say not one to every 1000 houses. Some thirty years since in my immediate neighbourhood, that is to say in Rochester and Chatham, one gardener (Mr. Wildish) pruned yearly upwards of ninety Vines: now, I doubt if there are so many properly managed and in a fertile condition (upon open walls) in the entire county of Kent. On the walls of the thousands of labourers' cottages which I have examined I have scarcely ever observed a solitary example. The few that are to be noticed, here and there, are usually in a neglected and unproductive state and most likely injured by disease. Indeed it is not to be expected that the cottages of the working classes should be better supplied than the walls of their masters' houses and gardens, to which a healthy Vine is almost equally a stranger. As for the disease to which I allude, it is simply a difficulty to be overcome with very little trouble. It seems to have been unknown until within about 17 or 18 years;* and it affects the Vines in hot-houses and green-houses even more than those upon open walls. The remedy, which is infallible, is sulphur applied in powder to the foliage; and, mixed with soft soap and tobacco ashes, to the whole of the trunk and stems of the trees about the month of March, or in April. These ingredients should be incorporated with hot water to the consistence of paint and applied with a soft brush.

* Edward Tucker, a gardener at Margate, is said to have been the first to notice it, in 1845. It must, I think, have been in that or the following year, I saw the fatal ravages of the disease (*oidium*) upon a Black Hamburg Vine in the garden of my friend the late Mr. Rolfe, of Sandwich.

I will not run the risk of tiring your patience, or rather of trying it, by a narration of my own experiments on Vines upon the open wall ; but I will merely observe they confirm in every respect the statements and opinions of Hoare. I may say, however, what I cannot find that either he or any other writer on the culture of the Vine mentions, that, to save time, it is important to ascertain, when Vines are purchased to be reared upon open walls or to be planted in any open situation, whether the young trees were struck in the open. If not, if they were rooted in a hot house or green house, then they will be checked in their growth for one year certainly ; and it may take two or three years before they become acclimatised. It is most essential that all growers of the Vine in the open air should know this.

Next in importance in rural economy come the Cherry and the Plum. Of the first of these I will but mention one variety, the Morello. In speaking of the Vine I excluded it from a northern aspect. In this the Morello delights. Now, that this, the most useful of all Cherries, should always command so high a price is a fact only to be ascribed to that general want of thought which deprives the greater portion of the population of the chance of tasting fruits which nature meant for all. It is, perhaps, the easiest Cherry to rear, as it is by far the most constantly productive. It will bear in the most exposed situations ; and, while others fail, it will in all seasons yield a plentiful crop. The rent of cottages might therefore be further helped by the Morello.*

The productiveness of various kinds of the Plum is also but little understood by the thousands who have gardens or courts without a single tree. Mr. Rivers† will tell you what his seedlings, raised from the *Précoce de Tours*, are capable of

* The wholesale price is usually from 6d. to 8d. per pound.

† Miniature Fruit Garden, by Thomas Rivers, 9th edition. Longman & Co., 1860.

producing ; and he has seen, approved and introduced into his nurseries for the use of the world, our Strood Cluster-Damson, which, from its amazing fecundity, will tend to revolutionise the Damson kingdom. The parent tree of all I have seen was found in the garden of my neighbour, Mr. Herbert, who says it was always worth a pound a year to him. Unlike the common Damson, it scarcely fails to bear enormous crops once in a dozen years ; and it would grow even in hedges ;* or it could be cultivated as a bush like Gooseberry and Currant trees.

As for the Gooseberry and Currant, they grow almost spontaneously ; and are so profitable that a gentleman in this county told me he paid his rent yearly from his currant trees alone ! Why, when such trees cost nothing but the labour of planting cuttings, should they not be found in every cottage garden ? Thousands upon thousands of cuttings, capable of forming bearing trees in two years, are yearly thrown away in districts where they could be turned to profit without the outlay of a penny.

Let it be understood that a garden *well managed* would not grow a less quantity of vegetables from being properly stocked with fruit trees.

Our chief writers on Horticulture, so far back as Evelyn, strenuously urged the nobility and gentry to improve their estates and their country by planting fruit trees. But if in former times they needed to be reminded and advised, how much more, at the present day, should their serious attention be directed to the subject ? I doubt if the plantations of fruit trees in this country exceed those of the time of Charles II. Compare this with the increased population, and we need not wonder that fruit has become an unattainable luxury. Landowners should advise their tenants to plant ; they themselves should set the example ; and every farmer

* The usual price of Damsons is 12s. per bushel.

should be taught to see that his cottagers' and labourers' gardens be properly stocked. We should go far to exterminate the habits of idleness, drunkenness and improvidence, now so common among the working and lower classes, if we could give them ground for gardens and teach them how to work it. Contrast the neatness and the comforts of the humblest cottage of the industrious labourer, to which a garden is attached, with the usual slovenly and untidy dwellings of those whose masters have land to give; but who want the heart and feeling to give. The tenants of the two classes of dwellings are equally marked in character; and the masters are as truly reflected in their men.

The late Mr. Cobbett, when staying with a friend in the South of England, was being driven by him in his chaise, on a summer evening, along a road unusually studded with labourers' cottages and gardens. The neat state of the dwellings, the flowers in front, and the fruit trees and vegetables behind, drew from the veteran politician warm expressions of admiration and delight. "To whom do they belong?" inquired Cobbett. He was told; "but," added his friend, "they are *Tories*." "Dont tell me," replied Cobbett energetically, "about their being *Tories*: they are damned *good* "men." He meant they were superlatively good; and so, we may hope, the recording angel understood it.

Believe me to be,

MY DEAR SIR,

Yours sincerely,

C. ROACH SMITH.

TEMPLE PLACE,

STROOD, KENT,

January 15th, 1863.