

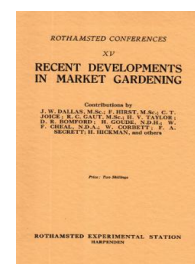
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Recent Developments in Market Gardening

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R. C. Gaunt (1933) *Market Gardening in the Evesham District* ; Recent Developments In Market Gardening, pp 31 - 35 - DOI: <https://doi.org/10.23637/ERADOC-1-208>

MARKET GARDENING IN THE EVESHAM DISTRICT OF WORCESTERSHIRE

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VEGETABLE-GROWING in the Evesham district is an old-established practice, but no evidence is extant as to when it commenced as a commercial venture.

There are many signs of Roman occupation, and it is not at all improbable that these small scattered areas have been cropped more or less continuously for fifteen hundred years. The soils are very deep and dark-coloured, engendered by long cultivation and manuring; and in some places it is possible to excavate three to four feet of earth that has, at one time or another, been completely turned over during the course of cropping. Of these, the land in the vicinity of Evesham Abbey is an outstanding example; this area of almost black soils is extensive and has, doubtless, been intensively cropped for several centuries.

The widespread employment of hand implements is a prominent feature of land management; the explanation is probably three-fold. A writer of some 140 years ago referred to the cultivators as the Evesham gardeners, and as gardening is rarely associated with the use of horse implements the expression adequately distinguished these growers from the arable farmers of the neighbourhood. Also, many of the holdings are small and the provision of heavy equipment would be expensive. And further, it is a well-recognised fact that heavier crops follow after digging than after ploughing.

In the Vale of Evesham the intensive system of market-gardening has been highly developed. To a great extent this has been due to the following several factors: security of tenure under the Evesham Custom; efficient practical training combined with an intimate knowledge of the local soils and their possibilities for cropping; and the confident belief in the lavish use of selected artificial fertilisers.

Land Tenure

The system under which land is held is worthy of particular notice, but it is not easy, in a few words, to explain it intelligibly; furthermore, so elastic and far-reaching is its effect that it is said to be impossible to give an adequate definition which would be applicable to all cases.

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In essence, the Custom of the district operates in the following manner. When an area of agricultural land is taken over for market gardening by a tenant an agreed rent is fixed. This is based mainly on the face value of the land for general agricultural purposes ; thus it may vary from, say, £2 10s. to £4 per acre per annum. After the agreement is signed the interest of the landlord ceases, excepting with respect to receiving the rent as it falls due. The tenant now becomes the virtual owner in so far that he can develop it culturally in any way he thinks fit. He can grow market-garden crops, plant temporary or permanent fruits, or otherwise adapt the holding to his immediate or future requirements. It must be admitted that such an arrangement offers to a progressive tenant admirable scope, as it means that the landlord's permission has not to be obtained before an improvement can be instituted.

Assuming, after the lapse of years, the tenant desires to leave his holding, he proceeds to find a successor ; this is never difficult if the land has been well maintained and is in good condition—healthy crops and free from weeds. Proper notice must, of course, be given to the landlord to whom the holder introduces the prospective new tenant. The landlord can object to the person nominated, but this is of rare occurrence.

In the meantime, the out-goer has come to terms with the ingoer as to the sum of money to be paid to him for the holding as it stands ; in other words, the new tenant pays his predecessor for the improvements. Thus, the right of the quitting tenant to receive the just reward for his labour and expenditure incurred in developing the holding during his years of tenure is acknowledged as a matter of equity under the Evesham Custom.

A change of tenancy can be effected at any time of the year. The new tenant is now under obligation to pay rent to the landlord and he can pursue the lines of development most suitable to the purpose he has in view. He can plant further trees, or cut down and remove existing trees, without the necessity of obtaining permission from the owner.

Such freedom of action has had much to do with the rise and extension of market-gardening in the Evesham district. Occupiers of holdings have been able to look to the future with confidence and one advantage of the established Custom lies in the disadvantage to the sitting tenant if he becomes slack and neglectful during the last year or so before leaving.

Soil Variations

The soils are very variable and, naturally, influence the cropping ; it would need a map to indicate properly their nature and distribution.

Near the river Avon, which flows through the middle of this region, light land predominates, and there is a gradation from gravelly to almost sandy loams. These soils are partly derived from

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river deposits, but northern drift has been responsible for pebbles which in places are abundant. They are usually deficient in carbonate of lime.

On the south side of the Avon, but mainly at some distance from its banks, a heavy soil type is encountered, the base being Lias clay with some Cotswold material here and there; analyses of certain fields have shown nearly 10 per cent. of carbonate of lime.

On the northern side the heavy soils (Lias clay) usually contain a much smaller percentage of carbonate of lime and may even be very low in this constituent.

Effect of Soil on Cropping and Cultivation

Visitors to the area are always struck by the extensive fruit plantations and, in April, when the trees are in flower, the predominance of plums is in evidence. The chief variety is the Pershore, or Yellow Egg, but many others are represented, such as Victoria, Czar, Belle de Louvain, Early Prolific, Monarch, Purple Pershore, and Pond's seedling. Plums are grown everywhere. At one time the system of planting in single rows, spaced one or two chains apart, was greatly favoured, as the trees provided shelter to crops grown between; but now that winter spraying is a necessity the block system of planting is universal.

Apples and pears occur to a small extent. Gooseberries have decreased considerably during the last fifteen years. Strawberries are grown on a small scale. Black currants have become popular. Raspberries and loganberries are on the increase.

As regards vegetable cultivation, the heavy and light soils show a sharp distinction. Spring cabbage are not grown on the former, obviously for the reasons that the crop would not mature till late in the season and surface working in the critical months, February and March, is not admissible. Asparagus, on the other hand, is an important crop on the heavy soils, but is now unknown on the light soils; attempts to establish it were made years ago but were unsuccessful.

Labour

The application of mechanization, or power cultivation, to the small holdings is entirely out of the question. On the heavy land it is essential to turn the soil over in winter and give it every chance to weather before March and April. Digging when the soil is wet in the depth of winter does not matter, but anything in the nature of heavy machinery travelling over the surface is not practicable. For this reason the two-tined fork is universally used and it is an education for anyone to watch the skilful manipulation of this simple tool. Throughout the winter months digging constitutes the chief work, and it provides employment for the men. Even on the light land there is little scope for heavy implements; the capital expenditure on such equipment for these small holdings would be unprofitable.

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It will be a thousand pities if economic conditions undermine the stability of the smallholders of the Evesham district. There is no more pleasing sight than to see men (and women) in almost every field through many months of the year. If mechanization has to be adopted of necessity in the production of market-garden crops, it will mean further extensive rural depopulation and the driving out of existence of a hard-working and extremely worthy class of skilled cultivator.

Parties visiting the Evesham district are always surprised at the almost meticulous care taken in keeping the land clean. In certain localities the occurrence of scattered weeds, such as would pass unnoticed on a farm, is regarded with abhorrence; and astonishment has often been expressed when an asparagus grower has been seen in summer removing the few weeds by hand and taking them away in a hamper to be burnt.

Seed-saving

Evesham growers are justly proud of their types of spring cabbage and Brussels sprouts. These have been raised through many years of rigorous plant selection. The chief reason why this has been undertaken was due to the fault of seed merchants in the past who had not laid themselves out to supply the requirements of the market-gardeners.

Strains of these two vegetables are not known under special designation, but the surnames of the growers identify the raisers.

The type of spring cabbage favoured may be described as rather leggy, early, and turning in (hearting) as it grows. It is essential to clear the ground in good time so that the next crop (usually Brussels sprouts) may be planted as soon as possible—April or early May.

The kind of Brussels sprout selected varies according to opinion, and is dependent on size (large or medium) and colour. For some of the heavy soils a very dwarf, compact type is popular; it grows very rapidly, and is usually cleared by the end of the year; the ground is then dug immediately for weathering.

Manuring

Experience is a wise teacher! Most of us have been brought up on the mineral theory of manuring which, while recognising the existence of various organic fertilisers, regards them as not being of economic utility in field cultivation. Although such a view may be justified, in so far as general farming is concerned, there are reasons why it is not always correctly applicable to intensive market-gardening.

In the Evesham district, on hundreds of acres, no live-stock are kept; in other words, farmyard and stable manures may be said to be non-existent, and neither are such manures purchased. When it is remembered that there is very little organic matter in the nature of crop residues to turn under, the question of the continuance of

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suitable mechanical soil conditions becomes of paramount importance. That these are effectively maintained can be seen by even a casual inspection of the crops at any time of the year.

In this connection, a distinction must be made between the two main soil types and their influence on cropping. Space permits short reference only to the light soils, where spring cabbage is extensively grown.

Spring cabbage in market-gardening is equivalent to the root-crop in farming; it is the first crop of the variable rotation and is, therefore, liberally manured. Stable manure if procurable would be costly to purchase, cart and apply, and for these reasons only the wisdom of using it at all is open to doubt on economic grounds. Some suitable form of artificial fertiliser, with a high nitrogen content, is, therefore a necessity; sulphate of ammonia, nitrate of soda, etc., are admittedly unsuitable for partially-rooted plants so late in the year as September; the rapid availability of the nitrogen and the type of growth induced by these mineral fertilisers entirely rules them out for application to leafy crops which have to stand the winter. By elimination, the choice of the principal dressing lies among certain forms of bulky organic manures, such as crushed hoof, meat and bone, fish manure and shoddy.

There is a prevalent opinion, derived principally from test-books on fertilisers, that the above-mentioned manures are slow-acting, but such is entirely incorrect. In 1925, Demonstration Plots were commenced at the County Experimental Station with the object of testing manurial methods in vogue in the Evesham district. The relatively rapid action of the organic manures selected has been clearly shown on spring cabbage during the months of September and October. Moreover, the nature of the stimulus is ideal for this class of crop, both stem and leaf developing uniformly and in such a manner as to confer hardihood upon the plants so that they are able to withstand a fairly severe winter. In the new year, they rapidly respond to mineral nitrogenous fertilisers and are ready to cut some considerable time before those differently manured; for example, with farmyard manure.

Heavy dressings of organic manures (up to one ton of crushed hoof, meat and bone, or fish manure, or two tons of shoddy) are commonly used as the pre-planting application, with or without phosphates and potash.

Succeeding crops (often Brussels sprouts followed by dwarf beans or peas) receive much lighter dressings of other fertilisers; for these, manurial applications are designed to supplement residues from the spring cabbage.

The Demonstration Scheme at the County Experimental Station is now in the fourth rotation and it is proposed to publish a review of the results in the August number of the *Worcestershire County Council Quarterly Agricultural Chronicle*.