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Memoranda of the Field Experiments at Rothamsted: May 1879



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Experiments on Clover; Hoos Field

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EXPERIMENTS ON THE GROWTH OF LEGUMINOUS CROPS—*continued*.

II.—RED CLOVER (*Trifolium pratense*)—HOOS FIELD.

EXPERIMENTS on the growth of Clover, with many different descriptions of manure, were commenced in 1849, and, with the occasional interposition of a corn-crop, or fallow, have been continued up to the present time.

As with other *Leguminous* crops, the result was, that mineral constituents applied as manure (particularly potass) considerably increased the early crops; whereas ammonia-salts had little or no beneficial effect, and were sometimes injurious. It may be added that, even up to the present, the beneficial effects of long previous applications of potass are apparent when there is any growth at all. To go a little more into detail:—

In the first year, 1849, the crops were throughout very heavy; especially with mineral, and without nitrogenous manure.

In autumn 1849 wheat was sown, and in spring 1850 Red Clover. In 1851 small cuttings were taken; and in 1852, though the crops were not heavy, there was by no means a failure. Since that time, however, all attempts to grow clover year after year on the same land have failed to give anything like a full crop, or a plant which would stand the usual time on the ground. Small cuttings were obtained in the autumns of 1855 and 1859 from seed sown in the spring of those years, and small but rather heavier cuttings in June and August 1865, from seed sown in 1864.

On two occasions (1851 and 1854) heavy dressings of Farmyard dung were applied to some of the plots; and in 1854 some received a dressing of 20 tons of dung, and 5000 lbs. of lime, per acre.

On some portions of the land Clover was sown 10 times during the 23 years, 1848–1870, and more frequently alone than with a corn-crop; but in 7 out of the last 8 trials the plant died off in the winter and spring succeeding the sowing the seed.

In view of these failures in the field, it is a fact of much interest, that in 1854 Red Clover was sown in a garden, only a few hundred yards distant from the experimental field, on soil which has been under ordinary garden cultivation for probably two or three centuries, and it has every year since shown very luxuriant growth. Seed was re-sown in 1860, 1865, 1868, and 1871. A small cutting was taken in the autumn of 1871, two cuttings in 1872, and two in 1873. Notwithstanding some injury from dodder in 1873, there still remained too much plant to break up; and, accordingly, fresh seed was sown between the rows on May 4, and this failing, again on July 7, 1874. Small cuttings were taken June 11, July 22, and September 30, 1874. A small cutting was again taken on June 22, 1875. On July 13 the old plants were dug in, and seed again sown, and this failing, seed was re-sown September 22. In spring 1876 there was luxuriant growth, but deficient plant; from which two small cuttings were taken, on June 26, and August 7. On September 1 (1876), the beds were dug up, and resown with seed, which came up fairly, but the plant suffered during the winter, and in May 1877 it was dug up and resown. From this sowing a cutting was taken on September 5, 1877; and three cuttings in 1878, on June 10, July 26, and November 1. In May, 1879, there remained some fairly vigorous plants, but not nearly enough for a crop, so the ground was dug up (the soil sampled), the plants then dug in, and fresh seed sown.

This (1879) is the 26th season of the growth of Clover, year after year, on this plot of garden ground.

In reference to the field experiments, it may be added that, in 1864, a portion of the land was trenched 2 feet deep, and one-third of the manure was mixed with the layer from 24 to 16 inches, one-third from 16 to 8 inches, and the remainder from 8 inches upwards. Owing to the characters of the season, the mechanical condition of the land was at first very unfavourable after this treatment; but, although many years have now elapsed, and the excess of constituents supplied was in some cases considerable, the plant has died off as completely on these plots as elsewhere.

Again, in the winter of 1867-8 small portions of the experimental land were dug, some to the depth of 9 inches, some to the depth of 18, some to the depth of 27, and some to the depth of 36 inches, and sown to the respective depths with different mixtures; supplying in some cases very large amounts of potass, soda, lime, magnesia, phosphoric acid, sulphuric acid, nitrate of soda, &c. From other similar sized plots, the soil was removed to the depths of 9, 18, and 27 inches respectively, and replaced by soil taken at the same depths from the garden border, on a portion of which clover had been grown successfully since 1854, as above referred to. In April 1868 clover was sown over the whole of these small plots, and on some other portions of the land not so treated; but the plant for the most part died off during the following winter.

In April 1869 the same portions were re-sown, small quantities of clover were cut in September of that year, but the plant again died off in the winter.

In April 1870 Clover was sown over the whole of the experimental land, this time in conjunction with Barley; but on those portions which had also been sown in 1868 and 1869 the plant again died off during the winter and early spring; whilst from those which had not been sown in 1868 and 1869 two small cuttings were taken in 1871. In the spring of 1872, the plant being then almost entirely gone, the land was ploughed up. It was again ploughed in July 1872, and in March 1873; the intention being to sow some other *Leguminous* crop; but owing to the wetness and lateness of the season this was not done; the land was again left fallow, and re-ploughed in the beginning of June and the end of July (1873). On May 4, 1874, the land was again ploughed, and sown with Red Clover seed, May 5, without manure. The plant came up well, and was very forward in September, when the flowering stems were cut down, but left on the land. During the winter and early spring the plant on those portions from which cuttings had been taken in 1871 almost entirely failed, and the land was ploughed up in May, and again in August (1873); whilst on those from which none had been taken since 1869 a fair plant remained, and two small cuttings were obtained, namely on June 23, and on August 9 and 12 (1875). On September 22, this portion of the land was ploughed up. In May (1876) the whole was re-ploughed, again in July and September, and left fallow. In May 1877, Barley and Clover were sown over the whole of the experimental Land, without further manuring, but the clover plant completely died off during the winter. At the present time (1879) the land is devoted to experiments with various *Leguminous* plants, which were commenced in 1878.

In the spring of 1871 the *small* plots in the field were again

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EXPERIMENTS ON THE GROWTH OF LEGUMINOUS CROPS—*continued.*

re-sown, and those of them with garden-soil were entirely enclosed, both around and above, by galvanised wire netting. Small cuttings were taken from these small beds in July 1872, and (excepting from the garden-soil plots, which had yielded considerably more than the others in 1872) larger cuttings were taken in July 1873. The produce was the largest where potass and nitrate of soda were employed, and where they were applied in the largest quantity, and at the greatest depths. In April 1874 there was still some healthy plant on all the plots, but it was considered to be too irregular to preserve. It was, therefore, dug in. The artificially-manured plots were re-manured as before, but only to the depth of 9 inches, and seed was sown on May 4th, July 6th, and October 22nd; each time the plant coming up well, but subsequently dying off. On the Garden soil plots, the plant from the first sowing (May 4), for the most part stood; requiring only to be made good here and there on July 6; and in September small cuttings were taken. In May, 1875, the plant was entirely gone on the artificially-manured plots, which were then dug up, and prepared for re-sowing. On the garden soil plots, though the rows were imperfect, some healthy plants still remained, and gave a small cutting on June 22. On July 24 these plots were dug up; and they, as well as the artificially manured ones just referred to, were re-sown with seed. All came up well, but in May (1876), the plants on the garden soil plots were entirely gone, and those on the artificially manured ones nearly so, but they yielded small cuttings on July 17. More small plots were arranged in the spring of 1874; on which the manures were dug in, at the various depths, on May 11th to 14th, and the seed sown on May 16th. One series received sulphate of potass only, another nitrate of soda only, and a third the two together. The plants came up fairly well, but there were some blanks in the rows, which were re-sown on October 22 (1874). A cutting was taken on June 22 and 23 (1875); the blanks in the rows were re-sown on July 24; a second cutting taken on August 17; and the blanks again re-sown on September 22 (1875). The plant was the most even on the plots with sulphate of potass, less so on those with nitrate of soda, and less still on those with both together. The amount of produce was also greater with each of the manures used separately, than with the mixture of the two. The plants on these new artificially manured plots, like those on the older ones, showed failure in the spring of 1876; but also, like them, gave small cuttings in July. All the small beds were dug up in August; the artificially manured ones re-manured as in 1874, the manures dug in to a depth of 9 inches, and seed was sown on September 1, which came up, but the plants died off on all the plots in the winter of 1876-7. In May 1877, all the small beds were dug up, and sown with Barley and Clover. To try the effects of shelter, the Barley stubble was left unusually high, but the young clover plants completely died off during the winter (1877-8). In the spring of 1878 the beds were dug up, and cleaned; and they were re-sown with Clover, without further manuring, on June 12 and 13. All came up well, but the plant was almost entirely destroyed by "Fly." In May 1879, there remained about a quarter of a plant on the plot with the largest amount of mineral manure,

including potass, and sown to the greatest depth, and perhaps a third of a plant where the same mineral manures, with nitrate of soda in addition, had been applied; but there was scarcely a single plant on any of the other plots. At this time, the end of May, 1879, all the beds have been cleaned, and will be re-sown with seed.

The general result of the experiments in the field has been—that neither organic matter rich in carbon as well as other constituents, nor ammonia-salts, nor nitrate of soda, nor mineral constituents, nor a complex mixture, supplied as manure, availed to restore the clover-yielding capabilities of the land; though, where some of these were applied in large quantity, and at considerable depths, the result was better than when they were used in only moderate quantities and applied only on the surface.

On the other hand, it is clear that the garden-soil has supplied the conditions under which clover can be grown year after year on the same land for many years in succession.

The results obtained on the garden-soil seem to show that what is called "clover-sickness," cannot be due to the injurious influence of excreted matters upon the immediately succeeding crop.

That Clover frequently fails coincidentally with injury from parasitic plants, or insects, cannot be disputed; but it may be doubted whether such injury should be reckoned as the cause, or merely the concomitant and an aggravation, of the failing condition.

The results of the experiments seem, therefore, to exclude the supposition that the primary cause of failure is either destruction by parasitic plants or insects, injury from excreted matters, or the shade of a corn-crop, and to indicate that it must be looked for in exhaustion of the soil. Still there remain several open questions. Is it exhaustion of certain organic matters rich in carbon, of nitrogenous food, or of mineral constituents? Again: is there an absolute deficiency in the soil of some of the substances in question, or only an unfavourable condition of combination, or, so to speak, of *soil-digestion* of them, for the requirements of Leguminous plants? Or, is there only an unfavourable distribution of them within the soil, considered in relation to the extent and character of the root-range of the crop?

These various suggestions cannot be further considered within the limits of this brief notice, which may be concluded by the following quotation from Rothamsted papers on the subject ('Journal of the Royal Agricultural Society of England,' vol. xxi. Part I. p. 178; and 'Journal of the Royal Horticultural Society of London,' vol. iii. p. 86, 1872).

"When land is not what is called 'clover-sick,' the crop of clover may frequently be increased by top-dressings of manure containing potass and superphosphate of lime; but the high price of salts of potass, and the uncertainty of the action of manures upon the crop, render the application of artificial manures for clover a practice of doubtful economy.

"When the land is what is called 'clover-sick,' none of the ordinary manures, whether 'artificial' or natural, can be relied upon to secure a crop.

"So far as our present knowledge goes, the only means of insuring a good crop of Red Clover is to allow some years to elapse before repeating the crop upon the same land."