

Vegetable Gardening for Leper Patients.

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REGULAR employment for the patients is a most important item in the routine of a leper settlement, and of all the varieties of employment I think that vegetable gardening is the best, for not only does it give healthy exercise, but it provides fresh vegetables in the dietary, a matter of great consequence.

The Secretary of the British Empire Leprosy Relief Association has asked me to write a few notes on the subject, as I have had experience of gardening in the tropics extending over twenty years.

The commonest mistake that is made in growing vegetables in the tropics is to shade the plants from the sun. All vegetables without exception will grow far better when exposed to the full blaze of the sun. It is only when in the seedling stage that they require any shade at all, and even then only during the hottest hours of the day.

Another common error is to give water in little sprinklings only. It is much better to give a real soaking once a week, and the next day to hoe the surface of the ground between the plants, thus breaking up the capillaries of the soil, and preventing surface evaporation. This does not apply to lettuces, which should have a good soaking every day if possible.

A third mistake is to use fresh manure. Whatever kind of manure is used, it should be old and well rotted, and it should be well mixed with the soil.

Choose a bit of ground well away from trees, down in a hollow close to water, but not subject to floods. Lay it out in beds four feet wide and about ten yards long. Leave two feet between the beds. Do not raise the beds above the general surface if the soil is of a porous nature. Rather let them be sunk a trifle.

Dig out the whole of the soil to a depth of two spades. Throw the top spit on one side, and the bottom spit on the other. Then put in six inches depth of manure, return the bottom soil and mix thoroughly. Then more manure, and mix this well with the top soil, and with as much wood ash as you can get hold of.

To prepare for sowing the seed, give the bed a real soaking with water, gallons and gallons, and let it soak in well. The next day hoe the surface when dry enough (but not if it is at all sticky), until it gets into a fine mealy condition—a “tilth,” as it is called.

Then draw straight furrows with a hoe edge along a stretched line, two or three rows, according to the kind of vegetable to be sown.

The furrows should not be deep, the general rule being that seeds should be planted at a depth of two or three times their greatest diameter. Scatter the seeds thinly, gently push back the soil over the seeds, and press down with a rake held vertically or with the foot, lightly.

Do not water till the seedlings just appear above the surface. All seeds germinate better if the soil is covered with grass laid on sticks, or with old sacks, but be sure to remove the covering as soon as the seedlings appear, or they will become drawn and leggy, and will never grow into decent plants.

Do not let the seedlings become too crowded, especially cabbages, or any other of the Brassica tribe, but keep on thinning out to such an extent as to prevent adjacent leaves from touching one another. Of course, young seedlings must be watered every day, and it is better to give water in the evening, and hoe the ground in the morning.

In a dry garden, deep planting is of the greatest help, that is, when sowing beans or peas, or when transplanting tomatoes, cabbages, cauliflowers, brussels sprouts or kale, dig out furrows a foot deep with a spade, and sow or plant at the bottom of the furrow, and as the plants grow taller gradually fill in the furrow until the soil is even heaped up

around the stems. By this means the root system is a foot or more below the surface, well protected and supplied with moisture.

Practically all the English vegetables can be grown to perfection in the tropics, but I find that African natives do not relish all our varieties. They are particularly fond of cabbages, kale, lettuce, tomatoes, carrots, onions, spinach-beet, spinach, beetroot. Dwarf French beans are never a favourite with them, in fact, it is not worth while growing them at all. They much prefer their own beans.

I have not mentioned potatoes, for I have always found that in really hot countries they do not do at all well, but in sub-tropical climates they are a great success. Imported tubers should be used if possible, or at any rate secure your seed potatoes from another district. Do not make use of your own produce for planting more than once.

A few special cultural notes may be useful. Cabbages like firm soil, plenty of manure and lime. Transplant from seed bed when about two inches high to another bed, and leave in this till about six inches high, then transplant to permanent quarters, not less than two feet apart. Always take up with a trowel, with a good ball of soil around the roots. Beet and carrots do not like much manure, so it is better to let them follow a crop such as cabbage, which will have taken a good deal of nitrogen out of the soil.

Tomatoes.—There is great discussion as to whether these should be grown on a single stem, by nipping off all laterals, *i.e.*, the branches which grow out of the angle formed by the main stem with the leaf-stalk, or by allowing the laterals to grow. I think it may be said that the native much prefers the latter method, for he gets much more fruit, but they are smaller.

Tomato seeds are better sown in a tin of soil kept in the shade. Leave till the plants are about three or four inches high, and then transplant deeply, covering the stems right up to the lowest pair of leaves. Heap the soil up as they grow, thus creating a trench on either side of the row, which should be filled with water daily. Tomatoes are very apt to split if allowed to become dry and then watered liberally. They should be watered daily.

Leper patients should also have as much fruit as possible : citrus, bananas, pawpaws, pineapples, mangoes, etc. These can all be easily grown.