

*Steeping* is the next point to be taken into consideration, no matter which of the aforementioned methods is practised. This process requires the greatest skill and attention on the part of the manager. The water best adapted to steeping flax is river or running water. If we resort to spring, or water containing minerals, the dam should be filled for a considerable time previous to putting in the flax; but if river water is used it should not be in the pond before use more than twenty-four hours.

Perhaps it may not be out of place to describe what the use of steeping is. Well, it is simply this:—A process by which the vegetable matter connecting the stem and fibre is decomposed by the immersion of it in water, and after which these portions are readily separated. The value of the fibre depends very much upon the care bestowed on the due performance of this process. The flax-dam should be made from four to six yards long, two to four yards broad, and three and-a-half to four feet deep. If a small stream be allowed to run through the dam constantly it is found to very much improve the fibre in color.

On putting in the flax to the dam it should be placed loosely in it in regular layers, sloping gently across the breadth of the pond or dam, with the root end underneath. After thus placing the flax in the dam we should put old scraws or sods with stones, &c., over these, so as to immerse it about four or six inches under the surface-water. It should be kept from the putting in till the taking out at this depth below the surface, but at the same time not to put on as much weight as would make the flax touch the bottom, which should not occur.

The time it takes for steeping varies according to the temperature of the weather and nature of the water, say from seven to fourteen days, or even more, if circumstances be not favorable. Every grower should learn to know how to test when the flax is steeped enough, as a few hours extra would materially injure the fibre. The best test may be stated thus:—Take a few stalks and break them at two places, three inches apart, near the middle of the stem, and if the three inches so broken separates easily when drawn downwards, without tearing or injuring the fibre, we may rely on its being steeped well. This test should be repeated twice a-day after fermentation subsides, for the change afterwards is very rapid. If we find, however, after lifting it out of the steep, that we did not allow it to remain long enough in, we may in a great measure rectify this by

allowing it to remain a little longer on the grass. When raising the flax out of the pond let it be done by men standing in the water, who hand it up to others ready to receive it on the bank. Care should be taken not to make very large heaps on the bank, as it might heat. It ought to remain on dreep for at least twelve or fourteen hours before carting off to the place for spreading, a process presently to be noticed.

Spreading should be performed on a pasture field having a good clean sole; if any weeds, &c., be on it they should be mown down clean with the scythe. The flax is evenly spread on the grass by women or girls with the greatest facility. If the weather be rainy when spreading, or if it occurs immediately after so much the better, so as they be good sun-showers, as they are sometimes called. The flax should be turned over twice or thrice carefully with the hand, or little rods made for the purpose, in order to have it of a uniform color. Six or eight days may suffice on the spread if the weather be sunny and showery at intervals, but if dry it often goes as long as twelve days. A good test of its being ready to lift off the spread is to take a few stalks and rub with the hands from top to bottom, and if the wood breaks easily, and separates from the fibre, leaving it in good order without tearing, we may lift with safety. Also, when the reeds are raising themselves from the ground in the form of a bow, and a string running from one end to the other.

Perhaps the best way is to take a bundle in and scutch it on the stock. When lifting it is well to remark to keep the flax even at the ends, in order to avoid a loss in scutching, &c.

If not perfectly dry the lifters set it up in caps for a few hours before tied into sheaves or bundles. During all these operations the different qualities should be kept separate, as a mixture would lessen its value.

Sometimes drying the flax over or before a fire is practised, which is always most injurious. If properly steeped and grassed such drying is not only unnecessary but pernicious; exposure to a good sun is quite adequate for making it ready to be scutched, &c. I have seen "kilns," as they are called, constructed for the purpose of drying flax; and actually it is oftentimes absolutely burned, it being damp when put before the fire, and consequently the oily and rich appearance of the fibre is totally disfigured. This is a point which all parties concerned in the growth of this invaluable