

Prickly Comfrey Cheap Spring food for cattle.

Sir.—Living on the edge of Dartmoor, where good pasture grass is always difficult to get; and in backward seasons like the present one is absolutely unattainable, I last spring tried the experiment of planting about three-quarters of an acre of my light peaty glebe, with Prickly Comfrey, only taking care to clean the ground thoroughly, to place the plants about a yard apart each way, and to put a good spadeful of stable dung at the bottom of each pit. I must confess to having been somewhat disappointed at the result. The plants came up strong and vigorous enough, but only some of the cattle would touch it, and with these it seemed rather a relish than a staple article of food, and it did not appear to save anything else. I tried making hay of it, as I had seen recommended, but I found it an

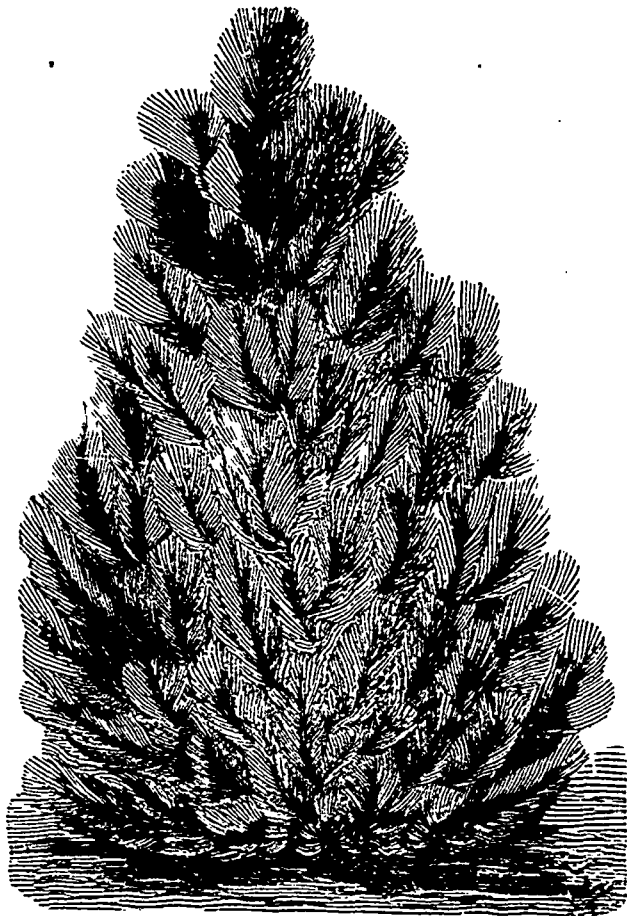


Fig. 9.—White or Weymouth Pine.

utter delusion; and from the nature of the plant, consisting largely of water, I believe it must always be so.

This spring, in spite of my having neglected to give the plants a good mulching of stable litter to protect them from the frost, they again came up early and strong, and gave promise of a most abundant yield; but the old difficulty of knowing what to do with it again recurred, and I began to think my man had been in the right when, coveting the piece of ground, which is close to the stable, for some other purpose, he had told me that "he only allowed me to keep that 'trade' [the Moorland word for rubbish] one season more."

Now, however, all is changed. The end of the maulgold, which we were pulping to mix with our chaff, loomed close at hand, whilst the coming in of vetches or any other green food looked a long way off in the cold dry easterly winds. Then a new idea struck us. We brought two large handcart-loads of the luxuriant young comfrey leaves up into the hay-loft, we laid them in the trough of the chaff-cutter, with about equal quantities of hay and of forage (i.e. of oats cut before the corn is ripe enough for thrashing out), and we cut up all together; then we left the large heap to welter for two or three days upon the floor.

The result is that we now have an abundant supply of sweet moist food, which every cow, calf, and horse eats with the utmost greediness, literally licking out their mangers, lest a fragment of the leaf

should escape them; and which, with the aid of a little decorticated cotton cake, will render us independent of all extraneous aid till summer is fully come. I may observe that the cook, who knew nothing about the cow's change of food, at once remarked upon the improvement of the butter both in colour and in texture.

For the benefit of those who think that price and value must always keep pace together, I must add, then, I planted part of the field with dear comfrey (8s per hundred for roots, and 12s. for crowns), and part with cheap comfrey, at, I think, 15s. per thousand; and that now both lots are of precisely equal value (though they differed so widely in price), and both are all that can be desired.

Instead of holding with Mr. Mechi (page 250), that each farm-horse consumes the produce of six average acres of arable land, I find, by experience, that by liberal tillage I can keep, in first-rate

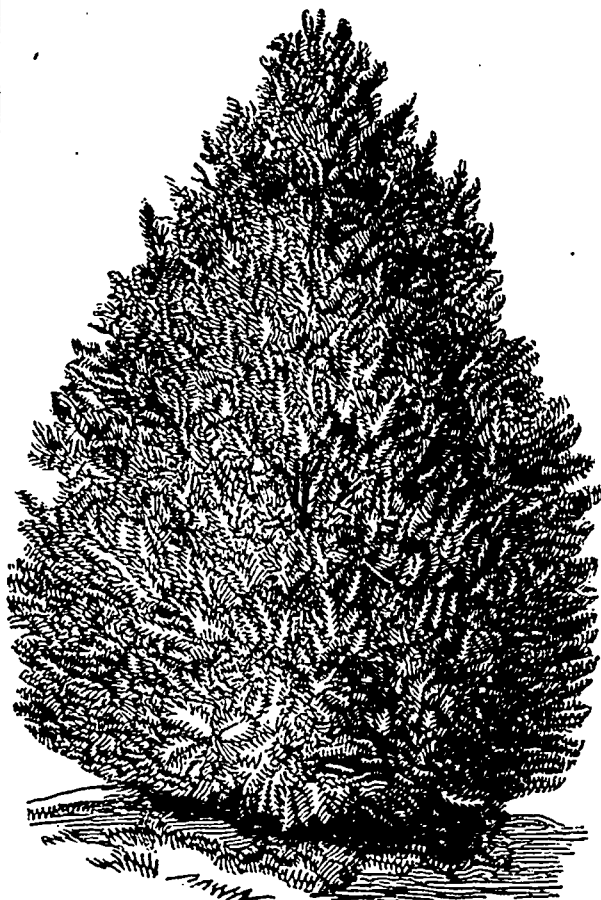


Fig. 11.—Black Spruce.

condition, at least a dozen animals (three horses, five cows, and four calves) on the produce of about nine acres of light soil, enjoying the great advantages of natural drainage and plenty of sunshine, as they lie on a good bed of granite with a good slope to the southward. The estimated value of the glebe is about £1 an acre.

Not keeping any sheep myself, I find that the sum paid for feeding off the spare swedes goes a long way towards supplying the necessary cake for the cows, besides greatly improving the land; and when the long expected roof is put over the dung-hill, I reckon that the sale of spare potatoes, for which peaty land is admirably suited, will more than cover all outlay upon artificial manures.

I think it is every man's duty in these hard times to give his neighbours the benefit of such practical experience as may enable them to tide over the present distress by making one blade of grass do the work of two, even if they cannot always "make two blades of grass grow where one grew before," and I am sure that our plan of freely mixing comfrey with chaff for spring cattle feeding will be an immense boon to many who cannot afford the apparatus and the labour required for steaming the food for their cattle.

F. GILBERT WHITE, (The Revd.).

Leusden Vicarage, Ashburton, April 26th.