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The Field.

Potatoes and their Cultivation

HISTORY.

The potato is more important as a variety of human food than any other root we cultivate; its cultivation extends over a wider range than any other plant; indeed, so universally is it diffused over the habitable globe that it is found in almost every position where man can exist. It extends beyond the limits of barley; even in the Arctic regions it struggles for existence, producing stunted watery tubers in an imperfect state of development, while it flourishes in tropical as well as temperate climates, so easily does it adapt itself to circumstances. It ranks among the most useful of vegetable productions; it is highly prolific, and its value, which is incalculable, is hardly understood to its fullest extent.

The family of the *Solanaceae*, to which the potato belongs, is suspicious; many species are narcotic, and many highly poisonous; though in the case of the *Solanum nigrum* (one of the potato family), the young and tender shoots, when cooked, are used as vegetables in some countries. It is curious to note that the poisonous bitter-sweet, the tobacco plant, the tomato, the Cape gooseberry, the capsicum, the deadly nightshade, and the henbane, the thorn apple, mandrake and petunia, all belong to the same family as the potato, which excellent vegetable was at first regarded with indifference by our forefathers.

Sir Walter Raleigh, though not actually the first to introduce the potato, was nevertheless among the first who endeavoured to attract attention to it, and cultivated it on his estate in Ireland. He could not of course have been acquainted with one-half its useful properties; and little did he dream that in after years it would radically revolutionize the diet of the country where it was first cultivated.

The scientific analysis of the potato is not within scope of this article, and it will be sufficient to say that it is rich in starch, that it does not contain as much gluten as our cereals, and that it is wanting in nitrogenous matter; it is, however, more nutritious than any other of our esculent vegetables. Potatoes have been said to possess the advantage of solidity, like bread, and to have the healthful properties of many fresh vegetables, without their acidity. As an article of diet, when not used exclusively, they are of untold value. So universal has the use of them become that they are almost an essential dish at dinner for both rich and poor—for who thinks of a dinner without potatoes?

The early history of the potato is, like that of almost all other cultivated plants, very obscure. It is a native of mountainous districts of tropical and sub-tropical America. Darwin states that it grows wild on the islands of Chiloe and Chonos, in great abundance on the sandy, shelly beach near the sea; that they resembled in every respect, and had the same smell as the English potato; that they shrunk in boiling, were watery, and had an insipid, bitter taste; that they were undoubtedly indigenous there, and grew as far south as latitude 50; that they were called *Aguijas* by the Indians of that part. He adds: "It is remarkable that the same plant should be found on the sterile mountains of Central Chili, where a drop of rain does not fall for more than six months, and within the damp forests of these southern islands."

Some writers state that the potato originally, in its wild state, was unpleasant to the taste and poisonous, wholly unused by the aborigines, and has been brought to its present perfection by cultivation; whilst others state that the potato had been cultivated in America, and its tubers used for food, from times long anterior to the discovery of America by Europeans.

The potato seems to have been first brought to Europe by the Spaniards from the neighbourhood of Quito, in the beginning of the

sixteenth century, and spread from Spain into the Netherlands, Burgundy and Italy, but only to be cultivated in a few gardens as a curiosity, and not for general use as an article of food. They were long known by the Indian name of the sweet potato, "*Batatus*," which is the plant and tuber meant by English writers down to the middle of the seventeenth century. The potato appears to have been brought to Ireland by Hawkins in 1555, and to England by Sir Francis Drake in 1585, without attracting much notice, till it was a third time imported from America by Sir Walter Raleigh about 1610. It was still a long time before it began to be extensively cultivated. Gerard, in his *Herbal*, published in 1597, gives a description and figure of the potato under the name of *Batata Virginiana*. As the potato is not a native of Virginia, it has been doubted if the plant there figured is the common potato. So little were its merits appreciated that it is not even mentioned in the *Complete Gardener* of London and Wise, published in 1719, whilst another writer of the same period says that the potato was inferior to *skirret* and *radish*! It hogan, however, to be imagined that it might be used with advantage for feeding "swine or other cattle," and by-and-by that it might be useful for poor people, and for the prevention of famine, or failures of the grain crops. It is said that the progress of potato culture was greatly retarded by many prejudices. There seems little doubt that the potato was cultivated in Ireland long before its introduction into Britain; but it was limited to the garden for at least a century and a half after it was first planted at Youghal.

Potatoes began to be tried as a field crop in Lancashire about the end of the seventeenth century. Before this time they were confined to gardens, and only used occasionally by the most wealthy. To Lancashire the field culture was confined for many years before it was extended much to other counties; but in the early part of the last century the culture of it began to spread over the country.