

TEA PLANT AND DRINK.



THE following brief notes will not satisfy the aspirations of anyone who desires much knowledge regarding our common wholesome beverage, but the author hopes that they may not be altogether uninteresting to the average tea-drinker.

If we give any credence to the legends of the Chinese, we must believe that in the flowery kingdom, tea has been known from time immemorial. What we are certain of, is that this plant indigenous in Assam, has been cultivated in China for at least one thousand years. It belongs to the evergreen species, and would, if permitted, attain to a great height, but, for the sake of convenience in picking, it is kept pruned to the average height of about four feet. It was introduced into Japan in the thirteenth century. In Ceylon its cultivation was many times attempted without success, until within the last half-a-century, when, on the decline of the coffee-plant, many of the inhabitants gave their whole attention to tea. The result has been, that the Ceylonese product is now famous throughout the tea-drinking world.

Of late years the production of tea has been tried in nearly all the countries of the world, but its success is mainly due to cheap labor, available to such a great extent in the East. Hence it is that although introduced and successfully raised in the Southern States, the cost of labor is altogether too great to permit successful competition with the Chinese producers. The people of this part of the United States may, however, look forward to the time when mechanical devices will take the place of manual labor, and the Southern States may be then able to supply at least the national demand.

For an exuberant growth of the tea-plant, a warm climate where rains are frequent and copious, is necessary. Other requisites for the successful cultivation of the tea-plant, are drains and furrows, con-

stituted in such a manner as to allow the water to run off easily. The advantage of this drainage is exemplified in the Chinese plantations, most of which are situated on hillsides. The plant, however, will grow in any good arable soil which is free from stagnant moisture.

Before it can be picked, the tea-plant must have attained the age of three years, by which time it has sent forth many shoots, from which, together with the leaves of the plant, the tea is made. The maximum yield of the shrub is reached at about the age of eight years, after which it begins to deteriorate. Picking the tea, that is, stripping the plant of its shoots and leaves is a rather delicate task, for very often the slightest injury received by a plant kills it. In China, a prosperous tea-garden has from fifteen to sixteen hundred plants. The average annual yield per plant is rated at one fifth of a pound of manufactured tea.

In the manufacture of tea the leaf is subjected to four processes, viz,—drying, rolling, fermenting and firing. The quality of the tea depends principally upon the fermentation. After being plucked and left to dry, or wither slightly, the tea is rolled between the hands, then it is put aside to ferment. During fermentation, it must be carefully watched, and when the color has sufficiently changed, it is, in favorable weather, exposed to the sun for about an hour. This having been done, it is immediately put through the firing process, that is, it is subjected to a brisk heat in warming-pans over an open fire, and then all work is completed except the sifting of the tea. These are the processes by which black tea is manufactured. In green tea the manufacture is carried on somewhat differently.

The manner in which tea is prepared and used varies in different countries. In some it is customary to take both the leaves and the liquid; the leaves being powdered in order to admit of their being swallowed easily. Except in China and Japan, something is usually added to the tea; milk and sugar in the British Isles