

THE POTATOE CROP.

TO THE EDITOR OF THE MARK LAKE EXPRESS.

SIR,—As public attention seems to be directed to the disease now prevailing in the potatoe plant, and as the district in which I farm is one of the principal for the growth for this valuable esculent for the metropolitan and west country markets, a report as to the prospects of the present crop will, I trust, be considered worthy of notice in the columns of your widely circulated journal.

The quantity of wet that fell from the latter end of March until the middle of April, retarded the planting season fully three or four weeks. The long continuance of dry weather that succeeded operated very materially against the working of the land, and the vegetation of the plant, which presented a most unpromising appearance up to the third week in June. Since that period we have experienced alternate wet and sun, and the crops progressed rapidly, promising in some measure to make up the deficiency which, in the opinion of the growers, previously existed: but no sooner was this idea formed than it was blighted; hundreds of acres which last year presented all the luxuriance the eye could wish are now nothing but a mass of blackened tops, emitting pestilential vapours.

I shall not enter into detail upon its first appearance or its progress, or whether it is to be ascribed to humidity, filth, or any of the hundred causes assigned by your various correspondents; but of this I will assure you, that from the late period of planting and the early stage of attack, the total want of plants in strong soils, and the diminished area under cultivation (owing to the losses sustained by disease last season), the crop of Good Marshland may be considered nearly a total failure.

Having given my opinion of the crop, it may not, under the present crisis, be trespassing too much, if I lay before you a brief sketch of the cultivation of the potato plant since this district became a considerable exporting one. I find, from those who have cultivated the plant for the last fifty years, that the first potatoes grown which took the lead is the London market were the kidneys, better known by the name of the red-nosed or red-nobbed kidney. It was the practice of the growers to import from Berwick-upon-Tweed as many as enabled them to command a sufficient quantity for plants for the succeeding year, the growth of the produce of the Berwick plant being much superior both in quantity and quality to the first crop; in the course of a few years the plant was evidently degenerating; for if the produce of the imported potatoes was planted, the result was the whole crop curled; to obviate which, the grower had to be at the expense of importing the whole of his seed: ultimately the Berwick potatoes totally failed. A similar description of potato was then introduced from Aberdeenshire, which for a few years answered well, but, like its predecessor, degenerated. This was succeeded by the old Perth red, which in its turn gave way to the Fraserbro' red, the potato now principally cultivated upon the best soils for the London Market. In the year 1845, upwards of three thousand tons of this description were imported into this district for seed alone. Having seen two or three varieties rise and fall, which at each alternate change caused a heavy loss to the cultivator, it is natural to suppose that every possible means to preserve and increase so valuable a production would be adopted; and I can confidently state that, during the last fifteen years, no expense has been spared by the farmers in this neighbourhood to enable them to effect that object: and had the parties to whom they

resorted for seed, and who always acknowledged them to be their best customers been equally particular, I do not doubt they would have been amply repaid for their labour, and many of the grievous losses sustained here avoided; but, unlike every other crop which is now sown or planted, strange as it may appear, they imported no fresh seed; they parted with their best produce, and they planted their refuse.

It is likewise worthy of note, that the middle of May used to be considered the best season for planting; it was the practice of the growers to pulverise the land to the fineness of meal, and no ploughing, harrowing, and rolling was considered too great to effect this object; the plants are cut at convenience, perhaps three or four weeks prior to planting; and the land in as dry a state as it was possible to get it. But since the year 1832, if the very reverse had not been adopted, if the potatoes were not planted in April, and the land in a moist state, if the plants were cut longer than a day prior to their being wanted, and if the land was ploughed more than twice, what was termed the dry rot invariably followed.

Thus failed a system that had been successfully pursued in the same district for upwards of thirty years; the opposite extreme in every respect proving to be the antidote.

Six years ago, we observed the dry rot in the produce after being lifted and pitted; this gradually increased towards the spring months, when the potatoes were vegetating: and last year, when all the continental states, and many parts of the adjacent neighbourhood, were visited by the prevailing epidemic, hundreds of acres never exhibited any symptoms of it during vegetation; but after being stored decomposed in a most rapid and extraordinary manner.

I have potatoes this season growing on land that never during the memory of man was potatoed. I cultivate them upon fallow clover, wheat and potato stubbles, with fold yard manure, London tillage, and guano. I got part of the plants from the north of Scotland, some from the south, and others from adjacent districts. I have different varieties, the old scotch kidney, the Fraserbro red, the prince regent, the Kent kidney, the early ash top, but the whole are similarly affected.

Who, then, after a careful consideration of these facts, and an examination of the root, can possibly doubt that the disease is not in the plant: and who can wonder this disease should take place, when, for years, the very plants we have been purchasing at so high a rate are merely the produce of the refuse? Does the farmer sow his refuse wheat, beans, or barley? Who so particular about his turnip seed? Is there in fact, any crop that he cultivates that he is not, nor has not, been attentive to in the selection of the seed save the important one under our notice?

Much was said last season of the escape of the potatoes grown in the north of Scotland, and I was induced to spend some weeks in the neighbourhoods of Perthshire and Aberdeenshire to obtain, if possible, potatoes perfectly clear of disease; but although they did not decompose in the pits in a similar manner to our own produce they all exhibited undoubted signs of it in a preliminary stage. Yet, I sincerely hope that that providence which provided a remedy for the smut in wheat, will be equally beneficent under our present calamity, and preserve to our use this, next to corn, stable food for man: for we must bear in mind that hitherto we have propagated the plant, from the root, throwing away, as useless, the apple, which would not have been given to us if not intended for some good result.

We are progressing rapidly with harvest operations.