

TURNIPS

William Marshall (1745–1818)

1796

The turnip crop, though cultivated in a good manner by a few superior managers, does not enter into the ordinary practice of this district. At present, not one acre in a hundred, taking the district throughout, is subjected to the turnip culture. I have rode through a succession of townships, without seeing an acre of turnips; and, of those that are sown, few are cultivated in a husbandly manner.

Nevertheless, there are, here and there, on this side of the Tame, a patch of turnips to be seen, set out, and cleaned in a husband-like style.

West of the Tame, where the soil is light, and the subsoil absorbent, the turnip crop forms the basis of the present husbandry: and this notwithstanding the proper management of the crop may be said to be new to this quarter of the kingdom. The hoeing of turnips has not been established as a practice in husbandry more, perhaps, than twenty years. To the Marquis Townshend, who sent hoers out of Norfolk, the country, I understand, is indebted for its establishment.

There may be two reasons why the turnip culture does not become prevalent in this district.

Grass can be had at will, the whole district being prone to it; while the soil and the subsoil, except in some particular situations, are perhaps ineligible for this crop. One strong evidence, at least, may be produced in corroboration of this idea. One of the largest farmers in the district grows no turnips, and gives this as a reason for his conduct.

The first year after his father gave up the management of his farm to him—some twelve or fifteen years ago—he grew a piece of turnips, the first the farm produced. The crop turned out pretty good, and he began, agreeably to the common practice of the country, to fold them off with sheep. But the piece lying flat and the weather proving wet, his sheep did “sadly;” and what was worse to a young farmer, his father laughed at him. He littered them in the close with straw, but this would not remedy the evil. At last he drew the turnips and threw them to the sheep on an adjoining piece; but even then they did no good upon them. In short, he speaks of eating turnips upon the ground with sheep as a thing impracticable!

I do not mention this circumstance to throw a damp on the culture of turnips, but to endeavor to assign them their proper soil and situation by showing, in striking colors, the difficulties to which the crop is liable on strong retentive land.

The other circumstance which has tended to check the cultivation of the turnip crop was the devastation by the turnip caterpillar in 1782, since which time its culture has been declining rather than gaining ground.

On a light dry turnip soil in an upland situation, this crop is become in a degree necessary; and there little difficulties are struggled with and miscarriages soon forgot. Here, on the contrary, where the land will remain in grass and where other arable crops are more certain and more productive, the turnip crop is less essential to good husbandry, though, in particular situations even in this district, I am fully persuaded by my own experience, it may under proper management, frequently be useful.

The only circumstances in the practice of this district that require to be registered fall under the heads succession, semi-nation, hoeing, and expenditure.

Succession—There is an instance of turnips being sown on old sward (a rich bottom) on one plowing without sod-burning; yet with good success.

I have seen a clover ley plowed up immediately after the first crop was off, sown with turnips and with a good appearance of a crop.

But the most extraordinary circumstance I have met with in the turnip culture is that of sowing them on barley stubble immediately after the crop was off, without plowing!

Some sheepfeed in the spring is all that is expected from this practice, and is not, it seems, unfrequently obtained. While the soil is in heart, the crop of barley good, and the surface of course clean, that is, free from the herbage of weeds, this may sometimes on a sheep farm and under particular circumstances be a valuable expedient. If the attempt miscarry, the seed only is lost. The thought, at least, is worth preserving; especially as the instance, which came more particularly to my knowledge, occurred in the practice of a judicious manager.

Semination—The deviation to be noticed is in the method of sowing. Instead of delivering the seed from between the two first fingers and the thumb, as is usually done, the seedman (some seedsmen at least) lets it fall back into the palm of his hand and delivers it from thence, in the manner corn is sown. It is observable that in this method of sowing it is necessary to keep the fingers close; otherwise, the seeds of turnips being small, they are liable to fly out between them. I mention this as a deviation rather than a superior excellency. I have seen turnips come up very evenly from this method of sowing, but not more evenly than I have seen them rise in Norfolk from the common method.

Expenditure—An expedient which I have seen practiced in this stage of the turnip culture is that of drawing the turnips (at the setting in of a frost, or to clear the ground in the spring) and loading them upon wagons, which are left standing in the piece, where the turnips are safe and ready to be drawn to whence they may be wanted.

William Marshall. *The Rural Economy of the Midland Counties* (1796):203–208.