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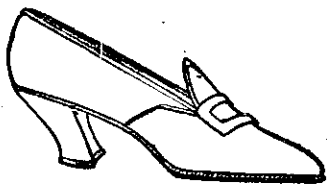
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WINNING PUMICE COUNTRY.

SETTLERS' EXPERIENCE.

(The following article, by ... G. Butcher and E. Earle Valle, in the "New Zealand Journal of Agriculture," gives useful information about the treatment of light pumice lands on which some returned soldiers have been settled).

Light pumice soils occupy several million acres in the centre of the North Island. It is estimated that they constitute about one-twentieth of the whole cultivable and habitable lands of New Zealand, and the bringing of them to a profitable condition is undoubtedly one of the greatest development propositions before the Dominion to-day. The pumice country, it need hardly be remarked, includes considerable areas of superior river flats and swampy land, such, for instance, as large parts of the Reporoa Estate, recently acquired by the Government. But it is not such land as Reporoa that we are here concerned with; the following notes deal only with the light "poor" lands, concerning which there is still much uninformed prejudice. The vast bulk of such lands are ploughable—that is, easily ploughable—with a double-furrow plough. Areas that are not so ploughable are, in our judgment, best adapted for afforestation. It is marvellous country for growing trees, but for ordinary farming the land should be easily ploughable.

CLEARING AND PLOUGHING.

Light pumice country is probably the easiest broken in of any land. Clearing may be done in many places by fire put in about three years ahead of requirements. The horses and bars will break down the half-rotten sticks, and the plough will cut them up and bury them. Denser or heavier growth must be cut, and, as far as our experience goes, the common slash-hook is still the best means. We regard it as a mistake to bury anything but the lightest scrub. With heavier stuff a cushion is formed between the underlying earth and the furrow, which effectively prevents the soil moisture rising. Consequently, a brief period of dry weather will kill anything sown in the top sod. Again, for three years afterwards one cannot put the plough in, as all the buried sticks would be merely brought to the top. There are, however, large areas of tussock and light scrub that can be ploughed straight out of the rough.

Any plough will make a fair job in light pumice land, but probably the best for a first cultivation is "heavy" P. and D. Duncan double-furrow. It will easily handle all ordinary stumps and pumice stones, saving many shillings per acre in clearing as compared with a lighter plough. It has sufficient clearance to avoid blocking with rubbish, and the weight on the skeith is enough to cut through ordinary sticks. The land should be ploughed as deep as possible, but so as not to turn up more than half an inch—or at the most an inch—of the raw sand or pumice. The depth can be slightly increased at each subsequent ploughing. The discing should follow the furrow, and one stroke is usually sufficient. Then harrow so as not to turn up roots, etc., to the surface. Finally, roll heavily. Drilling should be done with a disc drill so as to avoid the gathering of rubbish in front of the hoes. It is not wise to work light pumice soils too fine.

THE FIRST CROP.

The first crop should be put in right away. This cannot be done too quickly. A bare fallow on really light pumice is the greatest mistake: the soil leaches badly, and sorrel soon takes possession. The crop undoubtedly should be turnips. Any pumice land will grow good turnips;—the very lightest, soft turnips; the next better quality, Aberdeens; and the heavier and moister soils, swedes. Purple-top Mammoths, many roots weighing up to 14lb each, have been grown on pure pumice sand, on a first furrow, with 2cwt manure to the acre. Of course, these turnips need feeding off when they are just right. Aberdeens—we prefer the green-top variety—do well on soils only slightly heavier, and can be fed right into September. The best time to sow turnips is in the latter half of December. If any one doubts the capacity of pumice lands to grow turnips let him study the regularity with which roots from the Rotorua-Waitapu country secure prizes at the Waitakato, Palmerston North, and other leading winter shows—and this without special attention or cultivation having been given for show purposes.

In sowing turnips we give 1cwt each of super and blood and bone—2cwt in all. It would really pay to give 3cwt if one's resources allowed. Usually we have rolled again after the drill, but this may not be necessary, or, in some cases, advisable. A light brush harrow

towed behind tends to cover all seed on the naturally somewhat rough surface of a first cultivation. A stroke of the chain harrows in front of the drill, if there is time, and if the soil is not already too fine, tends greatly to an even surface.

SUBSEQUENT CROPS.

We do not advise grain crops in light pumice land, as they take too much out of it and encourage sorrel. In almost any section in this district an area of heavier land may be found upon which to grow oats. But if one must grow chaff on the light land a heavy crop should not be aimed at. Between 1½ and 2 bushels of seed, with 2cwt of the same mixture of manure, should give a good enough cut. Duns in autumn, Sparrowbills in early spring, and Tartars in later spring have given best results. Rust is very rare in the pumice country.

GRASSING.

The main consideration in grassing is getting a soil covering. Bare spaces are fatal; therefore grasses that will grow should be sown. Cocksfoot gives most feed, except in winter, when frosts cut in rather badly. Perennial rye-grass is not perennial—if one may express it that way. Italian rye is useful for a quick bite while the other grasses come on. Crested dogtail forms a good sward. Danthonia—the pilosa variety—forms a dense sole absolutely permanent, and keeps green throughout the winter. It is hard to sow through a distributor. Brown-top gives good pasture in spring and autumn, but yields no feed during frosts or drought.

The following is a good mixture for ordinary light pumice land: Cocksfoot, 10lb; Italian rye-grass, 4lb; crested dogtail, 4lb; Yorkshire fog, 2lb; brown-top, 1lb; Chewings fescue, 1lb; cow-grass, 4lb; white clover, 1lb; suckling clover, 1lb; sheep's burnet, 2lb; with 6oz soft turnips added for spring sowing, or 1 bushel rye-corn for autumn sowing. If this should be considered too expensive a seeding the cocksfoot might be cut down 2lb and the rye grass and dogtail 1lb each.

A mixture such as this, for a first furrow, will become quite permanent, but probably it will pay to plough it after about seven or eight years. A crop of swedes should be put in this time, and the land afterwards relaid with better grasses for a permanent sward.

In our opinion manure is best applied with the seed—as much as can be afforded within reason, but not less than 2cwt. per acre. Superphosphate mixed with blood and bone or bonedust gives best results. Basic slag and Egyptian phosphate do not seem suitable for light pumice land. Spring sowing should take place early in October, and autumn sowing in the latter half of February or the first week in March.

For surface sowing we recommend Danthonia pilosa, 3lb; brown-top, 1lb; Yorkshire fog, 5lb; suckling clover, 1lb; white clover, 1lb; sweet vernal, 1lb; Lotus hispidus, 1lb; Chewings fescue, 2lb; and crested dogtail, 1lb.

Some settlers adopt and strongly advocate the practice of sowing grass and turnips together on the first furrow, and this plan certainly yields a quick pasture. On no account should oats for a crop be sown with the grass.

MANAGEMENT OF THE PASTURE.

There is as much in the treatment of the paddock after being laid down as there is in the laying down itself. Overstocking should be carefully avoided, especially in the autumn or early winter. If at that time the roots are left exposed to all the frosts of winter, deterioration is bound to ensue—especially of cocksfoot. Do not put stock on to young grass too soon. It is best to stock first with calves. Keep sheep, and even more particularly horses, off for the first year, if possible. After a year or two it is an excellent plan to "fog" a paddock—that is, to shut it up in September or October and rigorously keep stock off it till early March. By this means much seed is cast, and a mass of vegetation goes down on the surface, forming a mulch of humus. This greatly encourages the stronger pasture plants—cocksfoot and cow-grass especially—and is a cheap method of restoration. If the paddock is then heavily stocked in March the seed is trodden in, and much will germinate.

The writers have not tried top-dressing, but doubtless it would be beneficial. Nor have they had enough heart to plough in green crops. In their opinion it is preferable to feed off these green crops, and the resultant dung, with a little artificial manure added, will probably pay better than ploughing in the crop itself. Again a surface covering as compact as possible should be created and maintained. Do not plough and leave light pumice soil bare if it can be avoided.

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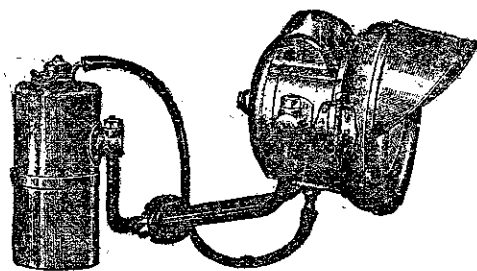
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