

FLAX-DRESSING. When the seeds are beginning to change from a green to a pale brown, is the best time for pulling flax. Where the crop grows of different lengths, these lengths should be pulled and kept separately, uniformity in this respect being of great value in the after-processes.

The process first gone through after pulling is *rippling*—which consists in tearing off the bolls by

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pulling the stalks through a series of iron teeth 18 inches long, placed within a distance of half an inch of each other. These are fastened in a block of wood, which is placed at the end of a plank or long stool on which the operator sits.

The next process is to obtain the flaxen fibre or lint free from the woody core, or *boon*, of the stem. This is effected by steeping the bundles in water till the boon begins to rot, in which state it is readily separated from the fibre. The operation is called *retting* or *retting*, and requires to be managed with great care, as by continuing it too long, decomposition might extend to the fibre, and render it useless; while by discontinuing it too soon, the separation could not be effected with sufficient ease. The time is generally determined by the nature and temperature of the water, and the ripeness of the flax—decomposition taking place more rapidly in soft stagnant water than in running streams, in which the retting is sometimes conducted. After being sufficiently steeped, the flax is spread out on the grass, to rectify any defect in the retting, and ultimately to dry it for the breaking. In some districts, it is the practice to conduct the retting entirely on the grass—a process known as *dew-retting*, in contradistinction to *water-retting*. This is a safer and less offensive method, but it requires much longer time, and in a country where land is valuable, would become very expensive. On the whole, the mixed method of retting is preferable—that is, to steep till decomposition of the boon is well advanced, and then to complete the process on the grass. It has been attempted to separate the fibre by machinery, without subjecting the flax to retting; but the article so produced has hitherto been rejected as inferior in quality.

To avoid the delays and uncertainty dependent upon the old processes of retting or watering, plans have been recently introduced, bringing the operation more under control, like the other processes of our manufactures. The methods which have been adopted, and are now working with success, are known as Schenk's and Watt's. By the first of these, the flax is placed in vats, in which it is kept down by means of strong framework. Water is allowed to pass into the vats, to become absorbed by the flax; steam is next admitted, till the temperature of the water is raised to, and maintained at, about 90°. Acetous fermentation ensues in a few hours; and after being maintained for about sixty hours, the decomposition of the gummy or resinous matter in the stalk is completed. The mucilage water is next withdrawn from the vat, and the flax taken out, separated and dried either in the open air or in desiccating rooms, according to circumstances. In Watt's process, the flax is placed in a chamber provided with a perforated false bottom; the top is double, and filled with water to act as a condenser. Steam being admitted to the case, the first result is the freeing of the flax from certain volatile oils. The steam rising to the top of the chamber is condensed by contact with it, and falls in showers on the flax beneath—a decoction of the extracted matter is thus obtained. In 36 hours, the process is completed; and the flax taken out, is passed between rollers in the direction of its length, which presses out the water and decomposed gum, and splits and flattens the straw. By this process, all that the plant takes from the land is saved—the seeds being available as food for animals, and the chaff and refuse water as manure.

Prepared by either of the plans, the flax is now ready to be freed completely of its woody particles. This is effected by *scutching*. Previous to this, however, the flax is passed through a *brake* or revolving rollers, in order thoroughly to crack the

boon. The brake, worked by manual labour, consists of a frame, in the upper side of which are a number of grooves; a movable piece is hinged at one end, and provided with a similar grooved piece on its lower side, but so placed that the projections pass into the hollows of the lower. The flax, placed between these, and struck by bringing down the hinged part, is broken, but the fibre remains uninjured.

In the flax-breaking machine, the flax is passed through a series of horizontal fluted rollers; the flutes do not touch, thus preserving the fibre while breaking the boon. In continental countries, *scutching* is almost invariably performed by hand, the flax being held in a groove made in an upright stand, and struck by a flat blade. Machine-scutching is much more certain and expeditious than hand-scutching, and is, in consequence, fast superseding it in this country. After passing through the breaking-machine, the flax is subjected to the action of a series of knives, attached to the arms of a vertical wheel; these knives strike the flax in the direction of its length. The process is gone through three times before the flax is ready for the market. Although machine-scutching is expeditious, it is not capable of that pliant adaptation to the varying nature of the flax to be operated upon, which is obtained in hand-scutching. The effect of machine-scutching is to produce fineness by reducing and impairing, rather than sustaining, the character of the fibre—namely, the length and fineness of its 'staple' or fibre. To remedy these defects, *scutching* by means of revolving brushes has been introduced. This divides the fibre without tearing it. The subsequent manufacturing operations will be noticed under LINEN AND LINEN MANUFACTURES.