

## GREEN VEGETABLES.

We have often listened to the advice, "Eat more fruit," and it might well accompany another piece of advice, "Eat more vegetables." A short article on the subject may not be out of place now that the days for salads have arrived; the lettuces in particular, in many country gardens supply, in their fresh greenness, a stimulus to introduce more of nature's summer-time gifts into the daily menu. The value of green vegetables has now been scientifically recognised for many years, and yet this recognition does but confirm knowledge centuries old—folk-knowledge we might call it—that green vegetables are of considerable value in the maintenance of health. Some of us at the present-day, however, would not easily acquire a taste for a good many concoctions in which the housewives of the past excelled. A good deal of their knowledge arose from John Gerarde's *History of Plants*, though few may have been conscious of the source of their knowledge. This worthy John Gerarde was born in 1545, and he began his experiments in food hygiene as a boy on his way to school, as indeed many other boys have done but with less enquiring minds and less fruitful results. For instance, he found the yewberry, said to be poisonous, a pleasant and harmless food, although we would accept his experience with caution, remembering the adaptability of schoolboy stomachs to the quality as well as the quantity of their contents.

John travelled in Italy, France and Germany to gather knowledge of herbs, being as he described himself, "no graduate but a countrie scoller." Later he superintended the cultivation of the gardens of Lord Burleigh, then Lord High Treasurer. But this is a digression, and we must leave this fascinating John Gerarde, his gardens, his lack of analytical knowledge, and his far-reaching wisdom, based on a heart full of love of nature and nature's gifts, and consider more ordinary things.

In the early 19th century we find the "mistress of a family" giving sound advice which proves that the value of green vegetables was understood long before so much attention was directed to scientific analysis and research into the sources and effects of the vitamin content in food.

This lady, of the days of the crinoline and good and frugal housewives, knew something about their value if she could not trace this value to its source as modern science has done; she counsels that vegetables should be used as soon after gathering as possible, for they "ferment" and "lose their flavours and wholesomeness" very quickly after being taken from the earth. She wisely says that they should not be kept in water or washed until immediately before they are used, all advice that holds good in the light of modern scientific study as well as of experience and wisdom. She however commits an error in recommending the use of baking soda to retain the greenness of cooked vegetables; modern knowledge shows that carbonate of soda destroys the vitamins and should not be used in cooking green vegetables. We might remind our readers of the vast knowledge of plants possessed by the great ladies of the Middle Ages, particularly by many scholarly and really scientifically minded abbesses. It is a pity perhaps that so much of their knowledge and real wisdom has gradually been buried and put out of sight by time and its so-called discoveries, for theirs must have been a fascinating as well as a beneficent branch of study.

Less attractive though especially necessary and more far-reaching is present-day study of "Herbals" as they come under consideration in the hygiene of food.

It may be well to state at once that the food value of green vegetables is (with the exception of peas and beans) exceedingly small and what they do possess is reduced still further by cooking. They are not storehouses like the

root vegetables. Further it is to be recognised that a large part of them remains unabsorbed; this residue, composed mostly of cellulose, has a value nevertheless in the fact that it provides ballast and a source of stimulus for the intestine, a very important aspect of the recommendation to "eat more vegetables." They teach and stimulate the intestine to maintain its activity, a far more healthy course than teaching it to depend on the administration of aperients.

In relation to green vegetables we have an illustration that the value of a food is not always measured by its protein content or by the amount of carbohydrate or fat which it may contain. Fresh vegetables are most valuable in the dietary because they supply the important vitamins, and let us not forget that it is to the vegetable kingdom also that many foods, other than vegetables, owe their vitamin content. In respect of their vitamins green vegetables are of great value in child hygiene, for they aid the growth of healthy tissue and increase resistance to infection. We have a good example of the value of green food in a general way if we but consider the difference between butter made from the milk of cows fed on grass and that obtained when the cows have to be fed on hay. A glance at the quality of the milk in either case will prove convincing in this aspect. Indeed we may go, without scientific knowledge, to the plants themselves for a lesson, on the value of the sunlight. Look at such plants as, from accident or design, have been cut off from it during their process of growth. They are pale yellow in colour—in other words they are devoid of chlorophyll which is necessary to the formation of their vitamins. Because of their richness in vitamins green vegetables are classed among the "Protective foods," for they lend considerable protection against certain diseases, as for instance rickets, pellagra, scurvy, certain eye diseases, osteoarthritis, infections of the ear and throat, skin diseases and malnutrition. We referred to the counsel of the early 19th century housewife in stating that vegetables should be used as soon after gathering as possible. We heard of someone who, prior to the war (she may think otherwise in these days of "digging for victory"), had sown a large part of her garden with grass because it was "as cheap to buy vegetables as to grow them." But an examination of other aspects of the matter than the economic one gives this statement the lie, and this particularly applies to the matter of vitamin C. This is very easily destroyed, and the fresher the green raw vegetables used the more is the intake of this and the other valuable and highly important vitamins.

Another important aspect of the subject of green vegetables (or indeed any vegetables) is that they are a very valuable source of mineral salts. Mostly these are found as compounds of potash which, because of their alkaline reaction, are beneficial to the blood and tend to control acidity of the urine. These alkaline salts, along with their vitamins, tend to make green vegetables very beneficial in cases of eczema, and indeed the latter will sometimes arise from a deficiency of such food. Iron is found in many vegetables and particularly in spinach and watercress, but the amount is largely dependent upon the soil in which the vegetables are grown, and the same applies when considering the extent to which iodine content is present.

We have referred to the fact that cooking tends to reduce the food value of green vegetables. They gain in water but lose much of their protein, carbohydrate, mineral salts and vitamins. "God sends the food and the devil sends the cook," says one old proverb, and this is very applicable where green vegetables are concerned. They should be boiled for the shortest period necessary to soften their cellulose, and in water just sufficient to cover them; but even with care in such respects there is inevitably a loss

*previous page*

*next page*