



YOU may or may not think that gardening is best left to gardeners, but if you wanted a million pounds of vegetables before next winter, you might hesitate to trust the spade and the hoe. The Government hesitated at this time last year. It called on the Fields Division of the Department of Agriculture, and the Department called on the machine. The result in 10 months was 1,060,000 pounds weight of first-grade peas, beans, cabbages, etc., from 112 acres of land.

Certainly the land was good—10 to 15 feet of river silt on a bed of shingle. The locality was convenient—Greytown, which has railway links with the biggest groups of consumers. The climate can be good, and last year was—though this planting season has been the wettest local residents can remember. The market was certain and measurable—so far as anything remains certain in war. Labour was made available from an unexpected source. There was luck in the choice of the staff.

Experience Scoffed

For the "experienced" did not doubt, or hesitate to say, that it was looking for trouble to hand over a job of this size to departmental officials. The supervisor selected for the farm was admittedly a man of ability—a Master of Agriculture from Massey College, who had worked in the Fields Division. Excellent, the wise ones said, if the job had been to talk to farmers. But the job in this case was to talk to the stubborn earth—to persuade it to produce more green stuff in a few months than it had ever produced before; and only gardening experts could do that.

Well, the wise ones were wrong. The land was taken over in August, 1942, and was all in production by the end of summer. Twenty-three different varieties of crops were grown, and the result at the end of 10 months was the amazing figure we have already quoted—

1,060,000 pounds of first-grade vegetables from a farm that might otherwise have carried 50 cows.

Oh, yes, you say—but the cost! Well, the cost was 27 per cent less than the return even on the ridiculously low valuation allowed as an all-over delivery price.

It Sounded Unreal

It sounded unreal when we heard it, so we accepted an invitation from Dr. I. D. Blair, Assistant-Superintendent of Vegetable Production for the Services, to spend a day at Greytown talking to the staff and getting a first-hand impression. It was a fine day, and there was not much that we did not see, but we shall not pretend that we spoke with all the 60 men and women we found at work. Two-thirds of them did not speak English, and were accompanied by armed guards as they worked. In most cases, they seemed to be working cheerfully, but they could hardly be called first-grade labour, even when allowance was made for their language difficulties. On some jobs, the supervisor told us, two or three of them would do as much as one good New Zealand worker, but in other cases, their efficiency was as low as one-fifth or one-sixth of the New Zealand standard. For example, a really expert New Zealander has been known to plant 10,000 cabbages in a day. A

good average New Zealand worker will plant 4000 to 5000. The figure for these special labourers is about 600.

Working Without Interest

We watched a dozen of them putting in a tile drain, and thought they worked about as hard as men ever work when they have neither a personal nor a material interest in what they are doing; ourselves in an unemployment camp, for example. We should think that they did about as much in a day as New Zealanders at present do in Germany. At the same time, the supervisor told me, most of them preferred garden work to the work they would be doing if they were not selected for vegetable growing. While it was not clear that they had done such work before—they remained reticent about the past—it was clear that they liked getting out into the open and working among growing things. Their interest in flowers—any kind of flower—was half ludicrous and half pathetic. Once when they were about to be returned to camp one man was found to be hiding a whole dandelion inside his tunic, root and all. Another was seen one day with a blue lupin, carefully extracted for replanting. An issue of cherry blossom sprays (through the kindness of a local resident), was deeply appreciated; but the big hour came when someone presented enough chrysanthemum roots to go round a whole working party. When

we were watching the ditch-diggers we saw one go suddenly very intent, and with great care retrieve a bird's egg from the soil. There was the case also of the man who found a rabbit's burrow and very tenderly carried off the young ones—not to be eaten, we were assured, but to be kept as pets.

There was satisfaction in seeing these workers treated as the parents of New Zealand prisoners would like to have their sons treated in Japan and Germany.

Meanwhile, they are helping in the production of vegetables on an organised scale to meet the great shortage brought about by the war. While there

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"The Department called on the machine": a tractor cultivator made by the staff at Greytown. In the photograph at the top of the page a Maori worker is seen picking dwarf beans on the farm