1-1-1961

Broom millet in the market garden

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WHEN we think of broom millet we usually regard it as a crop for growing either under flood irrigation or in summer moist swamps for the sole purpose of producing straw for brooms. However, the particular characteristics of the broom millet plant make it adaptable for use in the market garden as an excellent windbreak and rotation crop.

For those people who are not familiar with broom millet, it may be described as an annual grass which grows rapidly during warm weather provided that adequate moisture is available. Under favourable conditions it will grow to a height of 8 to 9 ft. in a very short period. This ability of rapid growth combined with a strong stem which will stand erect even after the plant has passed maturity makes it ideally suitable for use as a windbreak crop.

Broom millet has a number of advantages over other types of windbreaks in that it may be planted with the particular crop it is designed to shelter and will very readily outgrow the crop and hence give adequate protection. It is extremely easy to grow and is cheap as regards the amount of seed and labour needed to produce such effective protection. It is also relatively easily removed when desired.

Many of the windbreaks used in market gardens such as timber face cuts, palm fences or corrugated iron have the disadvantage that unless they are carefully constructed, as well as protecting the crop from wind, they are inclined to prevent air circulation. In the winter such permanent shelters are inclined to hold in cold air and retard growth.

Broom millet is effective in cutting down the force of the wind yet allows a gentle filtering action which keeps air circulating through the crop and assists in the prevention of a number of disorders. If desired, the crop can be topped to remove the seed heads and the stems will remain standing as a satisfactory shelter for many months.
The seed of broom millet may be sown through a small hand operated seeding machine in the same way as onion or carrot seed would be sown. Thinning of the stand after emergence is an advantage, in order to obtain the maximum growth and height of the windbreak. Thinning down to 9 inches between clumps of plants is generally satisfactory. Those growers who are interested in harvesting the straw from their broom millet windbreaks will find that there is a ready market for the crop as at present all straw for locally made brooms is imported. Although the return per acre for straw from broom millet cannot be compared with the return from good quality vegetable crops, the fact that the crop is saleable makes it an attractive and profitable rotation or windbreak crop in the market garden. Broom millet straw is valued at approximately £100 to £120 per ton, and a good crop under sprinkler irrigation could produce up to 1 ton of straw per acre. Plantings for straw production should be made not later than September, however seed could be sown at any time during the spring and early summer for windbreak or rotation crops.

In the past, market gardeners in this State have been able to justify to some extent a minimum amount of rotation by the frequent use of heavy quantities of organic manures. In the future however, it would appear certain that with increasing mechanisation, the shortage of organic manures and more extensive holdings that the introduction of special rotation crops will be essential. Broom millet is only one of a number of crops which could serve both as a valuable rotation crop and windbreak, but is one of the few which can be used for these purposes and still return a profit.

In the not far distant future, it could be quite a common sight to see neatly laid out market gardens with plots of vegetables interspersed with plantings of such crops as broom millet.

Should any growers be interested in harvesting straw from broom millet crops, they are advised to contact officers of the Department of Agriculture in order to obtain advice on the methods of cutting and curing the crops.

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