

Virgil's Georgics

Georgics Book 2

[177] Now give we place to the genius of soils, the strength of each, its hue, its native power for bearing. Firs then, churlish ground and unkindly hills, where there is lean clay, and gravel in the thorny fields, delight in Minerva's grove of the long-lived olive. A token of this is the oleaster, springing up freely in the same space, and the ground strewn with its wild berries. But a rich soil, which rejoices in sweet moisture, a level space thick with herbage and prolific in nutriment (such as we often see in the hollow of a mountain valley, for into it from the rocky heights pour the streams, bearing with them fattening mud), land which rises to the south and feeds the fern, that plague of the crooked plough – this land will some day yield you the hardiest of vines, streaming with the rich flood of Bacchus; this is fruitful in the grape, and in the juice we offer from bowls of gold, when the sleek Etruscan has blown his ivory horn beside the altar, and on bellied platters we present the steaming meat of sacrifice.

[203] Land that is black, and rich beneath the share's pressure and with a crumbly soil – for such a soil we try to rival with our ploughing – is, in the main, best for corn; from no other land will you see more wagons wending homeward behind slow bullocks, or land from which the angry ploughman has carried off the timber, leveling groves that have idled many a year, and tearing up by their deepest roots the olden homes of the birds – these leave their nests and seek the sky, but forthwith the untried plain glistens under the driven ploughshare. For as to the hungry gravel of a hilly country, it scarce serves the bees with lowly spurge and rosemary; and the rough tufa and the chalk that black water snakes have eaten out betoken that no other lands give serpents food so sweet, or furnish such winding coverts. But if a soil exhales thin mists and curling vapours, if it drinks in moisture and throws it off again at will, if it always clothes itself in the verdure of its own grass, and harms not the steel with scurf and salt rust, that is the one to wreath your elms in joyous vines, the one to be rich in oil of olive, the one you will find, as you till, to be indulgent to cattle and submissive to the crooked share. Such is the soil rich Capua ploughs, and the coast near the Vesuvian ridge and Clanius unkindly to forlorn Acerrae.

[226] Now I will tell you how you may distinguish each. If you shall ask whether a soil be light or closer than is the wont – for one is friendly to corn, the other to the vine; the closer to Ceres, all the lightest to Lyaeus – you must first look out a place and bid a pit be sunk deep in the solid ground, then put all the earth back again, and tread the earth level at the top. If it fall short, this farm land will be light, and better suited for the herd and gracious vine; but if it shows that it cannot return to its place, and if there is earth to spare when the pit is filled, the soil is stiff: look for reluctant clods and stiffness of ridge, and have strong oxen break your ground. As for salty land, the kind called bitter (unfruitful it is for the crops and mellows not in ploughing; it preserves not for the vine its lineage, or for apples their fame), it will allow this test: pull down from the smoky roof your close-woven wicker baskets and wine strainers: in these let that sorry soil, mixed with fresh spring water, be pressed in to the brim. You will see all the water trickle through the big drops pass between the osiers; but the taste will tell its tale full plainly, and with its bitter flavour will distort the testers' soured mouths. Again, richness of soil we learn in this way only: never does it crumble when worked in the hands, but like pitch grows sticky in the fingers when held. A most soil rears taller grass and is of itself unduly prolific. Ah! Not mine be that over-fruitful soil, and may it not show itself too strong when the ears are young! A heavy soil betrays itself silently by its own weight; so dies a light one. It is easy for the eye to learn at once a black soil and the hue of any kind. But to detect the villainous cold is hard; only pitch pines or baleful yews and black ivy sometimes reveal its traces.

[259] These points observed, remember first to bake the ground well, to cut up the huge knolls with trenches, and to expose the upturned clods to the North wind, long before you plant the vine's gladsome stock. Fields of crumbing soil are the best; to this the winds see, the chill frosts, and the stout delver, who loosens and stirs the acres. But men whose watchful care nothing escapes first seek out like plots – one where the crop may be nursed in infancy for its supporting trees, and one to which it may be moved anon when planted out, lest the nurslings should fail to recognize the mother suddenly changed. Nay, the print on the bark of the trees the quarter of the sky each faced, so as to restore the position in which they stood, the same side bearing the southern heat and the same back turned to the north pole; so strong is habit in tender years.

[273] First inquire whether it be better to plant the vine on hills or on the plain. If it is rich level ground you lay out, plant close; in close-planted soil not less fertile is the wine god. But if it is a soil of rising mounds and sloping hills, give the ranks room; yet none the less, when the trees are set, let all the paths, with clear-cut line, square to a nicety. As oft, in mighty warfare, when the legion deploys its companies in long array and the column halts on the open plain, when the lines are drawn out, and far and wide all the land ripples with the gleam of steel, not yet is the grim conflict joined, but the war god wanders in doubt between the hosts; so let all your vineyard be meted out in even and uniform paths, not merely that the view may feed an idle fancy, but because only thus will the earth give equal strength to all, and the boughs be able to reach forth into free air.

[315] And let no counselor seem so wise as to persuade you to stir the stiff soil when the North wind blows. Then winter grips the land with frost, and when the plant is set suffers it not to fasten its frozen root in the earth. The best planting season for vines is when in blushing spring the white bird, the foe of long snakes, is come, or close on autumn's first cold, while the hot sun does not as yet touch winter with his car, and summer now is waning. Spring it is that clothes the glades and forests with leaves, in spring the soil swells and carves the vital seed. Then does Heaven, sovereign father, descend in fruitful showers into the womb of his joyful consort and, mightily mingling with her mighty frame, gives life to every embryo within. Then secluded thickets echo with melodious birdsong and at the trysting hour the herds renew their loves; the bounteous earth prepares to give birth, and the meadows ungirdle to the Zephyr's balmy breeze; the tender moisture avails for all. The grass safely dares to face the nascent suns, nor does the vine tendril fear the South Wind's rising or showers launched from the skies by the blustering North, but puts forth buds and unfurls its every leaf. Such days as these, I can imagine well, shone at the dawn of the infant world and took no different course: springtime it was, the whole wide world was keeping spring, and the east winds spared their icy blasts: then the first cattle drank in the light, the earthborn race of men reared its head from the stony plains, and the woods were stocked with game, the firmament with stars. Nor could the tender beings endure the world's harshness, did not between the seasons' cold and heat come such repose, and earth receive the blessing of a clement sky.

[346] Furthermore, whatever cuttings you plant in your fields, sprinkle them with rich dung, and forget not to cover them with deep soil; or bury with them porous stone or rough shells; for the water will glide between, the air's searching breath will steal in, and the plants sown will take heart. And, ere now, some have been known to overly them with stones and jars of heavy weight, thus shielding them against pelting showers, and against the time when the sultry Dog Star splits the fields that gape with thirst.

[354] When the sets are planted, it remains for you to break up the soil oft-times at the roots, and to swing the ponderous hoe, or to ply the soil under the share's pressure and turn your toiling bullocks even between your vineyard rows; then to shape smooth canes, shafts of peeled rods, ashen stakes and stout forks, by whose aid the vines may learn to mount, scorn the wind, and run from tier to tier amid the elm tops.

There was space set aside for the storage of rotted dung mixed with lime, ashes, dust and wood shavings, and left to rot for at least a year. This was used for seed plots and pot plants, and was guaranteed weed free, "especially if the Pots... be powder'd with the Earth in the hollow of an old Tree finely sifted"