On the Consumption of Force by Plants in overcoming Gravitation.

BY THOMAS MEEHAN.

Every one interested in Horticulture knows how uncertain is the successful cultivation of the grape in the United States. The vines usually flourish well for a few years, but in most instances become the prey of numerous diseases before they attain any very great age.

In remarkable contrast with this general failure is the fact that grape vines growing over trees are generally healthy and fruitful to a remarkable extent. Branches from unhealthy vines on trellises, when they can get to ramble over the twiggy branches of a neighboring tree, resume the health and vigor lost by the parent or main vine.

These facts have had numerous observers, and are generally admitted. They have been frequently discussed in Horticultural journals; but every theory hitherto brought forward has been refuted. For instance, it has been suggested that the partial shade afforded by the tree benefitted the grape vine; but it is as perfect when growing over low bushes, on hot banks, exposed to high and dry temperatures, as when luxuriating among the shady branches of the tallest trees. Again, it has been suggested that as the vine is supposed to like a dry soil the roots of the tree tended to absorb superfluous moisture, and thus furnished the best conditions for the vine roots; but healthy vines are found on trees in impassable swamps: besides, the cases of branches from trellises before alluded to answer this supposition. Some have thought that as the foreign vine, growing under glass, thrives there so well principally on account of the humid atmosphere, the evaporation from the trees' foliage might benefit the vine growing over it; but it has been further observed that they grow as well over dead trees as over living ones: and so on, in like manner, every theory has been refuted, and the true reason unexplained.

I think Mr. Darwin's discovery of tendril motion will afford the key to this phenomenon, and enable us to form a new theory as to the origin and employment of force in vegetable growth.

Mr. Darwin has shown that the tendrils of plants are in continuous motion for a long time until they find something to cling to, when motion at once

ceases. Motion is an attribute of vital force; and vital force, whatever be its origin, must be sustained by nutrition.

There are two forms of motion. The one we call growth, which is the motion of the cells individually; the other, in animals, we call muscular motion, is the movement of the cells collectively. This tendril motion, unnamed because until lately unknown, is analogous to animal muscular motion, in its being a collective movement of the parts.

In animals we know that nutrition will only supply a given amount of force, and that if muscular motion receives an undue proportion of this force, growth (cell motion) suffers. In common language, the over-run horse gains no flesh. On the other hand, the disuse of muscular power fattens the animal. If the same division of motion exists in plants, and Mr. Darwin's paper shows it does, it necessarily follows that if one form gets more than its due share, the healthful balance is destroyed—in other words, the force necessary for excessive tendril motion in the grape vine exhausts the nutritive powers of the plant to supply; growth suffers, and disease ensues.

To apply this principle to the case of unsuccessful grape culture, we find in no system of grape management is any provision made for arresting tendril motion,—but on the tree thousands of little twigs invite the tendrils at every turn. No motion is expended except for what we might almost term healthful exercise,—the balance is used in growth.

Observation on many species of climbing vines under similar circumstances confirms these views. The growth and general healthfulness of every kind of vine, is in exact proportion to the climbing facilities afforded it. The garden pea will furnish a ready means of testing this proposition. It will be found that difference in vigor, general healthfulness, and longevity, is strikingly in favor of those grown on twiggy branches. Peas unstaked grow weakly, bear early and sparingly, and die young. Honeysuckles ramble to great heights and have large luxuriant foliage on fine wire trellises, but when dangling to one straight stick they grow very little indeed. The most striking instance that came under my observation was in some *Wistaria sinensis* which had been trained to form self-supporting dwarf trees. The branches would only grow two or three feet in a season, but a few of the shoots in time bending over and reaching the ground, where they found a natural support, would grow thirty feet during a single season. The observations in this way were so uniform, and the materials being everywhere, any one can verify this without it being necessary for me to particularize further instances.

Every effort of nature is but an endeavor to accomplish an object. The history of a plant's life is a struggle with gravitation. The purpose of that struggle is with the Author of its existence, but its immediate object is to elevate itself from the earth. The force required for this is very great. In its young days, however, it goes on with vigor,—taking no thought, as it were, of to-morrow,—but, as it grows older, it becomes bowed down by the weight of its own accumulations; gravity tells on its wide-spreading branches, reminding it of its growing weakness. It then prepares itself for its final dissolution by producing fruit, which, fully accomplished, the struggle with gravitation ceases, and dust to dust returns.

The whole of this enormous motive force must, as we have seen, be derived from nutrition,—and the proper proportion due to each form of motion must be provided and paid to it, or deranged action be the inevitable consequence.