

FLAX, *n.* [A.S. *flæx*; Fris. *flax*; D. *vlax*; Ger. *flachs*. Allied to Lat. *plico*, Gr. *plikkō*, to wear.] (*Bot.*) The common name of the genus of plants LINUM, *q. v.*

(*Manuf.*) The fibre of the *Linum usitatissimum*, separated from the woody portion of the plant, and ridded of any impurities, after which it is spun into thread, from which state it is woven into LINEN, *q. v.* It is supposed

to be the fruit of Egyptian discovery, as the coverings of the mummies found in the pyramids all attest to their being composed of what is generally termed flax. The flax-plant is of slender form, and of an annual growth. It reaches generally the height of from 2 to 3 feet, and has small lanceolate leaves, which terminate at the extremities in delicate blue flowers, which are afterwards replaced by seed-vessels, containing each ten seeds. The plant itself grows over the whole extent of Europe, Asia, and America. The time for gathering the flax is



Fig. 1930. — FLAX.
(*Linum usitatissimum*.)

when the leaves begin to drop off, and when the stalk has a yellow appearance. The stalks are then stripped, and the seed-bolls carefully gathered, and stored up for the next year's supply. The first process in the preparation of the flax is to steep the stalks in water until decomposition and fermentation take place; that causes the glutinous matter which binds the woody and fibrous parts together, to become separated. The duration of this process is from six to twenty days, according to the quality of the water employed, and the state of the flax-plant. After the first process, the stalks are dried, and in this state they may be kept in sheaves for years. After the flax has been *retted* (as the first operation is called) and dried, it is broken, repeatedly beaten with a flat piece of wood, and also *scutched*, in order to remove all woody particles from the fibre. The last operation is termed *heckling*, which consists in combing the flax through and through, in order to separate the different threads; after which it is prepared for the spinner's hands. This process is required as much to straighten the fibre, as to lessen any knots or irregularities in the filaments. The action of the heckles divides the scutched flax into two portions, — the long ones, which remain straight after the operation, being termed *lines*, and the woolly mass *tow*. Both of these are spun; but the line affording better *yarn*, is, of course, the more valuable of the two. The great object in heckling is to produce the greatest possible amount of line, and the least possible amount of tow. — See SPINNING, LINEN.