GEERT VEENHUIZEN (1857–1930), THE PIONEER OF POTATO BREEDING IN THE NETHERLANDS

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ABSTRACT

Potato breeding proper in the Netherlands started in 1888 at the initiative of GEERT VEENHUIZEN at Sappemeer. He was very successful in breeding new potato varieties and stimulated Dutch farmers to tackle potato breeding.

On November 18, 1957, just 100 years from the day that VEENHUIZEN was born, a memorial meeting was held at Sappemeer. VEENHUIZEN'S significance was illustrated and a portrait presented to the Agricultural University.

Reproductions of the portrait and a memoir in higher, secondary and primary agricultural schools will keep alive VEENHUIZEN'S significance for agriculture in the Netherlands.

1. INTRODUCTION

On 18 November 1957 the 100th anniversary of the late GEERT VEENHUIZEN was commemorated. It is no doubt worth while to note this celebration in Euphytica, the more so as in foreign literature little information is found about this pioneer of potato breeding in the Netherlands.

In some other countries a purposeful potato breeding programme was initiated at an earlier year (4, 5, 6).

2. GEERT VEENHUIZEN, THE PIONEER OF POTATO BREEDING IN THE NETHERLANDS

In a previous article (2) it was stated that also in the Netherlands the potato crop suffered from diseases and that gardeners and nursery men early tried to raise potato plants from true seed in order to obtain more vigorous and higher yielding stocks. No group of professional breeders sprang up, not even when in 1846 the Government imported true seeds of potatoes from Germany and distributed this seed among gardeners and farmers.

Potato breeding proper in the Netherlands started in the Northeast in the Reclaimed Peat Districts of Groningen, a region of intensive cultivation of potatoes for industrial purposes. In proportion as potato growing expanded new varieties were continually imported from abroad (chiefly from Germany), but they often fell short of expectation.

At the initiative of GEERT VEENHUIZEN (Fig. 1, reproduction of the painting), nurseryman and florist at Sappemeer, the local agricultural association laid out a potato variety trial field in 1888 and in the following years, in order to compare the
new varieties with the old ones and also to increase them. The management of this trial field made him take a greater interest in plant breeding.

After reading an article in the horticultural journal Semperviren on the creation of novel Bromeliaceae by means of artificial crossing Veenhuizen conceived the idea of developing new, productive potato varieties for industrial use (7).

In the course of years Veenhuizen introduced many varieties. He was not out to make profit; he loved plant breeding for its own sake.

In table 1 (DE HAAN, 1) a survey is given of the varieties developed by Veenhuizen. Starting in 1888, as early as 1892 ten of them were on the market. The year 1893 was a lucky one for Veenhuizen. That year he developed the Eigenheimer, valued as a potato for human consumption and for the potato meal industry, which expanded in later years and which was also appreciated abroad. His Thorbecke dates from 1901.

This variety was for many years the most widely cultivated potato variety for industrial use in the Netherlands. Veenhuizen concentrated his efforts on the creation of potatoes for industrial use, but in addition he also succeeded in originating good varieties for human consumption (Eigenheimer, Bravo, Rode Star, etc.), which came to dominate the varietal range in the Netherlands. Agriculture has greatly benefited from his work.

From the table 1, in which the most important varieties have been printed in bold type, it can be concluded that, in general, the time for developing new varieties was surprisingly short when compared with the creation of new cereal varieties or those of leguminous crops. Bravo and Eigenheimer were introduced after a few years, and this was also the case with Thorbecke. It is clear that only a small quantity of seed potatoes could be available, for, assuming a seedling to produce 20 tubers and the rate of increase to be 1:20, at most 8,000 tubers would be available in the third year. When keeping healthy stocks the multiplication takes place at a considerably slower rate.

It is interesting to quote the first description of Bravo from the report of the Central Trial Field (Fig. 2) covering the year 1898, since it clearly demonstrates the “fine nose” of Veenhuizen.

“No. 11, which was submitted under number 58 the previous year and which we praised at that time already, proved excellent also this year and thus we decided to give it a trial on a larger scale at the trial field “Eureka” in order to distribute it from there into the Reclaimed Peat Districts when it again proved good”.

“The variety is one of the finest as concerns foliage; the stems are robust and firm, of moderate height; the leaves are very large and of a particularly yellow-greenish colour. The plants grow rapidly so that the soil is soon covered, the light-blue flowers are conspicuous against the light-green foliage. The tubers are round, many somewhat flattened, the eyes are very shallow. Its taste was excellent at every trial; its colour is intensely yellow, also on the dish, so that, in our opinion, it may become one of the very best varieties for human consumption. It has been named Bravo therefore, a real Dutch name”.

FIG. 1. REPRODUCTION OF THE PORTRAIT OF GEERT VEEHNUIZEN, PRESENTED TO THE AGRICULTURAL UNIVERSITY, WAGENINGEN. THE ORIGINAL PORTRAIT IS PLACED IN THE INSTITUTE OF AGRICULTURAL PLANT BREEDING