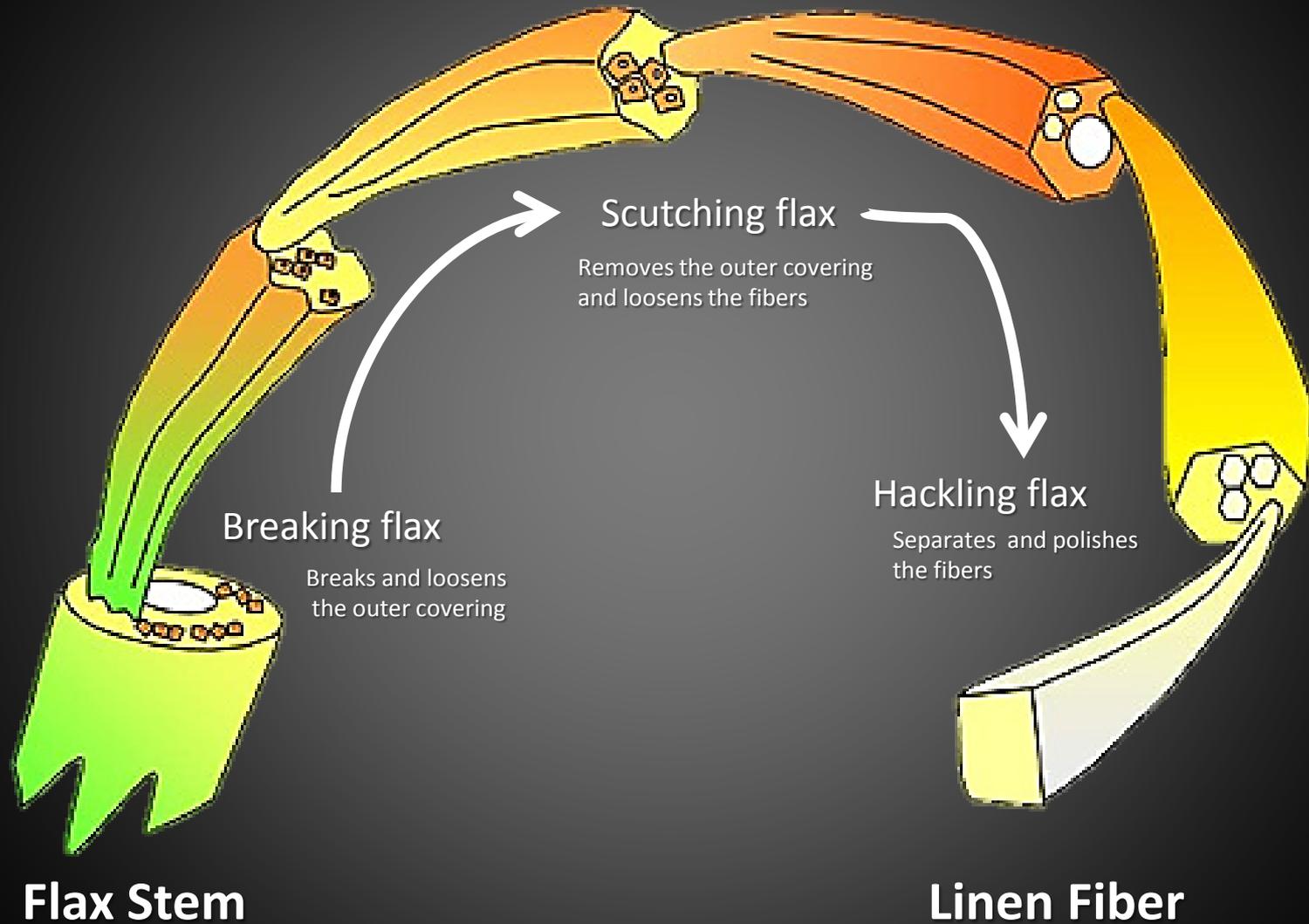


A wide-angle photograph of a field of blue flax flowers in bloom. The flowers are densely packed and stretch across the foreground and middle ground. The sky is filled with soft, white clouds, and a line of green trees is visible in the background. The overall scene is peaceful and natural.

Flax to Linen

Flax to Linen

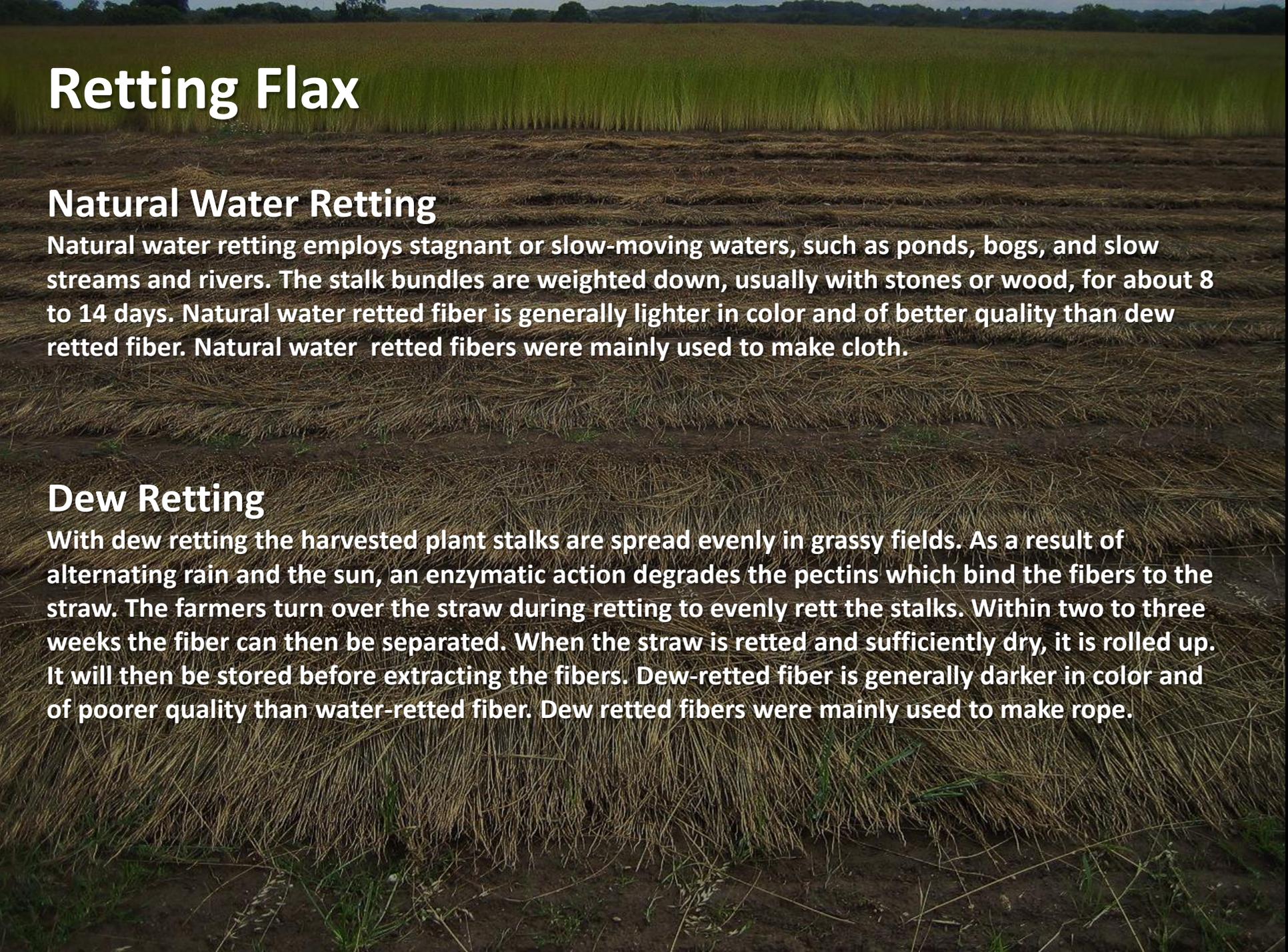


Flax Harvest

Flax is harvested after approximately 100 days, or a month after the plant flowers and two weeks after the seed capsules form. The mature plant is pulled up with the roots (not cut), so as to maximize the fiber length. The flax is allowed to dry, the seeds are removed, and it is then retted. The flax remains on the ground between two weeks and two months for retting.



Retting Flax



Natural Water Retting

Natural water retting employs stagnant or slow-moving waters, such as ponds, bogs, and slow streams and rivers. The stalk bundles are weighted down, usually with stones or wood, for about 8 to 14 days. Natural water retted fiber is generally lighter in color and of better quality than dew retted fiber. Natural water retted fibers were mainly used to make cloth.

Dew Retting

With dew retting the harvested plant stalks are spread evenly in grassy fields. As a result of alternating rain and the sun, an enzymatic action degrades the pectins which bind the fibers to the straw. The farmers turn over the straw during retting to evenly ret the stalks. Within two to three weeks the fiber can then be separated. When the straw is retted and sufficiently dry, it is rolled up. It will then be stored before extracting the fibers. Dew-retted fiber is generally darker in color and of poorer quality than water-retted fiber. Dew retted fibers were mainly used to make rope.

Rippling Flax

Rippling is the process whereby the bolls (seed pods) are removed from flax straw. The way that rippling works is that flax straw is drawn through a rippler or rippling comb and the bolls pop off or are pulled off away from the straw. The bolls are then separated from the straw and are saved for future processing or for planting flax the following year.



Rippler



Flax Seed Pod (boll) with Seeds

Breaking flax

After the flax has been retted it is necessary to break the woody core, or boon, into smaller segments. The stalk becomes partially separated from the fiber when the wet plants are placed in the fields to dry. The small broken pieces fall away when scutched leaving the long and flexible flax fibers intact. The flax needs to be dry and it may take retted flax several weeks to dry properly. If the flax has been retted correctly and it is dry enough, the inner core will break with a snap rather than bend.



FLAX BREAK



Scutching flax

Scutching is the second step in the processing of flax in preparation for spinning. The scutching process separates the impurities from the raw material, such as the straw and woody stem from flax fibers. Scutching is done with a wooden scutching knife. The end products of scutching flax are the long flax fibers, short coarser fibers called tow and waste woody matter called shive.



Hackling flax

Hackling is the last of three steps in dressing flax, or preparing the fibers to be spun. It splits and straightens the flax fibers, as well as removing the fibrous core and impurities. Heckling is done with hackling combs by pulling the flax through the combs. This parts the locked fibers and makes them straight, clean, and ready to spin.



Spinning flax

Linen is spun wet - that is the spinner places a container with water nearby and dips her fingers in the water frequently to help smooth the spun yarn.



Distaff

Spindle



Distaff is a tool used in spinning. It is designed to hold the unspun fibers, keeping them untangled and thus easing the spinning process. It is most commonly used to hold flax. Fiber is wrapped around the distaff, and tied in place with a piece of ribbon or string.