



## The *New* American Farmer

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Bill Slagle Walnut Meadows Enterprises

Bruceton Mills, West Virginia

### Summary of Operation

■ 300 acres in hardwoods for timber; on-site sawmill, dry kiln and cabinet shop

■ 10 acres of ginseng 30 acres in fields awaiting reseeding in timber

### Problem Addressed

*Diversifying a forestry system.* With 300 acres in valuable hardwoods, Bill Slagle has both an asset and a liability. Growing a permanent crop like trees, while environmentally sustainable, can pose a challenge for farmers in need of steady income.

### Background

Most of Slagle's Walnut Meadows farm sits in the extreme northeast corner of West Virginia, only a mile from the Maryland border and less than two miles below the Pennsylvania state line. There are sections of it, however, in both those neighboring states. He describes the setting as the "foothills of the Allegheny Mountains — not real steep, but definitely not flatland." His highest point is about 3,000 feet.

Slagle traces his family's ownership of a portion of the farm back to 1846. Since then, the lower, more level sections have been cleared for crops and pastures, but the slopes have remained wooded, though culled regularly.

His father farmed the land during the Depression, and Slagle cites that experience, along with his father's loss of sight when Slagle was four, as the strongest drive behind his own continuing efforts at diversifying his crops and making a profit. The family was the first to sell Christmas trees in the area, but it wasn't enough to make ends meet during the Depression.

"We made Christmas wreaths and sold honey and just did everything we could to keep the family going," he recalls. "And that's just stuck with me."

With a complementary array of income-generating efforts, which can be lumped under the general rubric of "agroforestry," Slagle maintains a good standard of living as his trees slowly reach maturity.

Slagle is married, with four grown children who have left the farm but still participate in the family business. He worked off the farm as a high school building trades teacher for 21 years, and his wife still teaches at the local high school though both are past retirement age. A grandson, William Russell Slagle, helps Bill Slagle run the sawmill.

### Focal Point of Operation — Agroforestry

Every activity on Slagle's farm appears to lead naturally to the next, and every crop complements every other crop. Perhaps his biggest "take-home" message is that the income potential from each crop doesn't have to end with the harvest. For example, Slagle started experimenting with growing ginseng 30

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years ago because he realized that the environment left after thinning a stand of hardwoods was potentially perfect for the shade-loving plant. Ginseng can be grown on open land with the use of shade cloths and canopies, but Slagle learned that it loves partially wooded hillsides most of all, with plenty of moisture and a northern exposure if possible.

He could meet all those conditions, and

**“I’ve been lucky. I got into it before there were too many experts and I started doing everything exactly the opposite of how they say it should be done.”**

began growing about five acres of ginseng under the semi-wild conditions buyers prefer over field-cultivated ginseng. He cultivates some on his lower, open land as well. It doesn’t sell for nearly as much as his simulation-wild ginseng does, but fetches more than corn or soybeans.

Each fall, Slagle harvests ginseng roots and berries. His acres are divided into several plots with plants at various stages of maturity. He tries to limit his take to plants that are at least eight years old.

“Sometimes the market’s so good I’ll take plants younger than that,” he explains, “but it’s always risky because most of my buyers are Asian; they know their ginseng root. They aren’t going to take the younger, smooth roots. They like them thin and wrinkled, and that only comes with age.”

Slagle admits he could go to the trouble of drying the roots and likely make more money, but he doesn’t like taking the risk of the roots rotting instead of drying. “I’d

rather sell them fresh, or ‘wet,’ as they say. I still get \$50 a pound for them.”

He contracts to make ginseng into berry juice, used for diabetes, weight loss and other health concerns. He doesn’t stop there. Slagle has become a national marketer of ginseng seed, too.

About 25 years ago, Slagle also began to cultivate shiitake mushrooms, which are

prized by chefs both in restaurants and in home kitchens. The semi-shaded stands left behind after he culled a woodlot provided ideal conditions for mushroom growth, and branches from the hardwood trees he cut provided the ideal growing medium. He sold both mushrooms and spawn, which fetched about \$10 a quart, but discontinued the mushroom operation in 2003.

“The mushrooms were very profitable, but we learned there are limits to what you can do and still do well,” Slagle says. He estimates his wife and a full-time worker spent about 18 hours a week on the shiitake operation over six months, soaking logs, harvesting, and making deliveries. “It’s always better to do a good job at what you’re doing,” he says, “and there are limits. If we had the time, we’d start the mushrooms up again.”

High-quality mushrooms can sell for as much as \$6 an ounce, and some wild mushrooms and truffles sell for much more.

Slagle uses the extra time to focus more on

the sawmill, dry kiln and cabinet shop. His new saw mill, which he runs with his grandson, and a drying kiln allows him to take the tree from sapling to specialty hardwood. The crop grows over many seasons and requires limited or no tillage, minimizing the loss of topsoil and moisture. By culling only select trees and avoiding clear-cuts, he also avoids problems with erosion, stream silting, and runoff, and his efforts have earned him a top-ten ranking in a national tree farming survey.

Finally, Slagle raises nursery stock, balled and baled for local landscapers.

#### **Economics and Profitability**

In 2003, Slagle harvested 1,000 pounds of ginseng on a 30- by 100-foot plot. The 13-year-old roots sell for as high as \$50 a pound. He’ll augment his root sales by harvesting seed, too. Gross income has to be weighed against labor and variable costs. Slagle estimates labor is his biggest expense. He also stresses that ginseng is a high-risk crop with great potential for failure.

“You can make money, but there’s a lot of commitment,” he says. “If it’s a wet season, we almost have to live in the ginseng gardens to guard against disease.”

The new foundation of income generation is timber sales. “I’ve divided the place into sections, and my goal is to see that each section is culled once over the course of 15 years,” Slagle says. “That means steady income, even if it’s not every year, but it also means the place is sustainable.”

#### **Environmental Benefits**

Tree farms offer opportunities for sustainable farming because the crop grows over many seasons, requires limited or no tillage and thus minimizes problems with loss of topsoil and moisture. More than 90 percent of Slagle’s property is forested.

He fertilizes his 10-acre walnut plantation using chicken manure and commercial fertilizer. To prevent canker, he uses bleach and fungicide on every cut during pruning.

By culling only select trees and avoiding clear-cuts, he avoids problems such as erosion, stream silting and runoff. Such efforts have earned him awards, including a Top 10 ranking in a national tree farming survey.

### Community and Quality of Life Benefits

During the time he taught building trades at the local high school, Slagle instituted an all-inclusive program in which students would come to his farm to both plant and harvest trees. They would then mill the trees into usable lumber, and construct houses, cabinetry and furniture from it. Each year, this three-day project involved up to 25 vo-ag and forestry students, Boy Scouts and others.

“They got to see the whole process from start to finish that way, and I think you learn so much more when you do that,” Slagle says.

A certified construction business grew from the effort, too, a business Slagle still oversees, though retired. He hired an 18-year-old to be the foreman, who, two years later, is running a crackerjack crew. “He and his crew just built a \$3 million house on a nearby lake that has a lot of my trees in it,” he says.

Slagle continues to bring children from many nearby schools out to the farm to experience the trees-to-lumber process. They can tour a small museum he built to house the tractors he restores and the antique farming tools he collects. With about 200 students and other agriculture and forestry groups, Slagle hosts more than 1,000 visitors annually.



*Bill Slagle grows chestnut and walnut trees for nuts and timber. He regularly invites students to learn about forestry—and pick nuts for school fundraisers.*

“We pay for the gas to get [the schoolchildren] here because my wife and I think it’s important for kids to see how things used to be when everybody lived on farms and had to make their own food,” he says.

### Transition Advice

Growing ginseng, Slagle admits, is a tough business. “I’ve been lucky. I got into it before there were too many experts and I started doing everything exactly the opposite of how they say it should be done. I didn’t know I was doing it wrong until they told me, and by that time I was pretty successful.”

“You need the right kind of soil, the right amount of shade, and a great deal of patience,” he added. “It’s a temperamental crop, and the roots will rot on you, and the mice will eat the roots, and rust will set in, but if you can wait all that out and learn from your mistakes, it’s a crop that can make some good money.”

### The Future

Slagle says the future of his tree farm has been plotted for at least the next 50 years. “We know where we’re going to plant more, and where we’re going to take trees off and when.”

The farm will continue to be managed by his family for at least the next generation, and he can’t imagine they will stop growing ginseng or trees.

■ *David Mudd*

For more information:

Bill Slagle  
Walnut Meadows Enterprises  
RR3 Box 186  
Bruceton Mills, WV 26525  
(304) 379-3596  
www.walnutmeadowsginseng.com  
bill@wmginseng.com

*Editor’s note: This profile, originally published in 2001, was updated in 2004.*