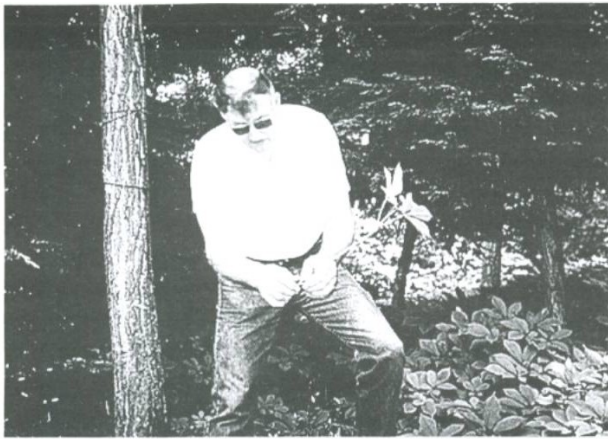


Forest Landowner Takes Unusual Path to Farm Profits

By Jenni Vincent, *Times West Virginian*

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Bill Slagle inspects the roots of a ginseng plant. He cultivates 7 acres of ginseng under the shade of black walnut and native hardwood trees.

Bruceton Mills, West Virginia - Touring Walnut Meadows Farm is like entering another world.

Bill and Elsie Slagle's home, which is located in Preston County's rolling hills, not far from the Maryland border, lies on land which has great sentimental as well as agricultural value.

"This farm has been in the family for more than 300 years. My great, great, great, great, great grandfather bought it in 1765 from the Indians at Friendsville, MD," Slagle said with a proud smile, pausing as he glanced up at some pine trees swaying gently in the breeze. "I'm not sure, but I think he married one of the chief's daughters and we sprang from that."

Unlike some who might be discouraged by northern West Virginia's hilly terrain, Slagle believes that every one of his 90 acres presents a unique opportunity. And because of this philosophy, Slagle has successfully made a name for himself by growing unusual crops such as ginseng and mushrooms.

A former vocational education teacher, Slagle's unique agricultural exploits have also been well recognized. A Monongahela Soil Conservation District cooperater since 1950, Slagle was recently chosen as the district's conservation farmer of the year.

"We grow (ginseng) until it's about 10 years old before we sell it. And we like to go 10-13 years because the Chinese (buyers) like the older roots," Slagle said, noting that his ginseng is a higher quality than that found growing wild.

Wild ginseng, which is one of the world's most valuable herbs, is a perennial which grows in Eastern

hardwood forests with rich soil, Slagle said. "But because ginseng root is valuable, some overzealous collectors dig too many wild plants. The plants often fail to reseed, and as a consequence, there is a serious concern about the survival of American ginseng in the forest ecosystem," Slagle said.

"There is another choice, however, and that is woods-grown ginseng. Woods-grown refers to the use of a natural forest canopy for shade," Slagle said.

As a youngster, Slagle recalled his family supplementing their farming income with things other than corn, alfalfa and beef cattle. "Even back then, we always tended to make our money off of non-traditional things. For instance, when we were growing up we picked the log moss in the woods and sold that to be used in dish gardens," Slagle said. "Surprisingly, a simple thing like moss was very marketable."

"As a young man, I would lay brick all week, come home and load my wife and family in the back of the old truck. We'd go into the back of the Blackwater Canyon or someplace and make more money picking moss on a weekend than I could all week," he said.

Today, mushrooms - wild as well as cultivated - are a good cash crop for Slagle. "Just last night, I brought home a mushroom I found. That's good because we sell a lot of wild mushrooms in Pittsburgh. I cut one right off the stump right beside my mailbox one Friday night not too long ago. And my wife took it to Pittsburgh and sold it for \$90 the next day," Slagle said, adding that he and his family had sold a thousand dollars worth of wild mushrooms last summer.

Cultivated mushrooms are grown in a shady spot near a stream on special "mushroom logs" which Slagle designed and takes pride in showing the hundreds of visitors who've toured his family farm.

During mushroom season, which is approximately May through December, Slagle said he sells 200-500 pounds a week. "We had 300 pounds in the month of December. And even on Christmas Day I picked 20 pounds of mushrooms," he said.

Farmers - especially those who make a living off traditional crops - have a hard life, Slagle readily acknowledged. And he has no desire to trade places with them.

"I respect all the people who farm because most of them work really hard. But for us, the non-traditional route has definitely been the best," he said. □