



Woodlot Possibilities

By Phillip Meeks

PHOTO FROM THE BACKHOME COLLECTION

If we look back only a generation or two, we see resourceful men and women taking every opportunity to use their properties, though of limited acreage, for income. Leaves and roots were marketed to ointment and elixir manufacturers. Strips of hickory yielded baskets and chair bottoms, and many a young man earned spending money by trapping the mammals that made their homes along the creek bank. In the Appalachians where I live, a hillside provided enough coal, hauled by mule and sled, to heat the home and cookstove for the winter, often with extra to sell.

Not unlike the forest-living fami-

lies of yesterday, today's property owners with small woodlots can find various income opportunities other than, or in addition to, selling timber. This takes not only a careful inventory of the land's capabilities but some core research into what people are willing to pay for.

Food for Thought

One thing is for certain. As long as humankind inhabits the face of the planet, a market will exist for food products. Blackberries, blueberries, walnuts, hazelnuts, and other forest foods can be sold relatively easily through small classified ads in the

local newspaper. Morels and other edible mushrooms are highly prized in some circles and will bring a good price. Such products require very little in the way of advertising, since so many folks are already acquainted with their merits.

Shiitakes—gourmet mushrooms originating in Asia—have been gaining fans on both the production and the consumer ends in recent years. Because shiitakes are grown commercially in small-diameter oak logs or sawdust [see *BACKHOME* No. 17 for *homegrown shiitakes*], the fit within sawmill and woodlot goals is obvious. Says Deborah Hill, professor of forestry at the University of Kentucky, "In this state, we have very limited or nonexistent markets for small-diameter hardwood trees. Therefore, the idea of using such trees to produce shiitake mushrooms (or several other marketable exotic mushrooms that also grow on logs) is kind of a natural, and I think this is part of what attracts people to the idea."

Hill reports that several states have active shiitake marketing programs, including West Virginia, Virginia, Ohio, and North Carolina. University-level research is also being conducted in Alabama and Minnesota. "Millions of pounds of shiitake are now produced nationwide," says Hill, "and the price for wholesale mushrooms has remained amazingly stable at \$5 to \$7 per pound fresh weight."

A person interested in learning more about the production of this gourmet mushroom—and any local marketing program that may already be in existence—should first contact the local cooperative extension office to identify the best sources of shiitake information in that particular state.

Green Industry

Nurseries, florists, and other similar businesses have need of a steady supply of plant materials, from acorns and other tree seeds to decorative items such as wild grapevines, pinecones, holly, and other greenery.

Even a small woodlot can yield profits other than timber.



Furthermore, the trend in the nursery industry is an ever-growing demand for native plant materials for use in home landscapes and mitigation projects. Where nursery managers found themselves ordering exotic species a few years ago, they now have trouble filling demands for trees and shrubs that grow—of all places—in the nearby woods.

Assuming collected plants aren't threatened or endangered and no local or state laws prevent their collection for commercial purposes, a weekend in a woodlot can yield small sums of cash for such items as vines, seeds, and pinecones, and larger amounts for living plant materials. Check first with individual florists and nurseries to see where the greatest needs lie.

Landscapers and greenhouse operations require an entire line of mulches, barks, and soils, enabling landowners with a few hundred dollars invested in equipment to create an important green industry resource from limbs and timber-stand-improvement leftovers.

For those with an artistic flair, bonsai is a very specialized art form that can generate considerable revenues. A bonsai tree is simply one that has been allowed to age with minimal growth. Any of a number of tree seedlings—cherry, birch, pine, hemlock, and others—are collected from the forest and the roots are trimmed back over a period of time. The tree acclimates to minute food and mineral requirements, and then it is placed in a pot, trimmed, and trained. [See "Bonsai for Beginners," *BACKHOME* No. 2.] A bonsai artist with a bit of skill can bring home several hundred dollars apiece for his or her creations, although the demand for such high-dollar specimens is relatively tight.

Leases

Leasing property for agricultural or recreational purposes is another attractive option for those with sufficient acreage. On behalf of private individuals and companies, Fountain Forestry in Pittsfield, New Hamp-

shire, leases approximately 65,000 acres, most of which are located in northern New York. Operations manager David Daut explains that there's considerable variance for recreational leasing fees from state to state, but in the Adirondacks, \$2 to \$10 per acre is typical, depending on tract size and amenities. The proximity of the land to cities and towns—and therefore to hunters in need of hunting grounds—is also a factor.

Generally, Fountain Forestry prefers to lease client lands to special-interest clubs as opposed to individuals. Such an arrangement gives the owner a single contact should any questions arise, and it's practically a guarantee that all users have the same forest management goals in mind. Furthermore, clubs will often make improvements to the property, explains Daut, such as converting an old skid trail to an ATV road.

Woodlot owners with old notions of hunting clubs may need to rethink their preconceptions, as the modern organizations aren't just interested in a place when a particular season is in. "We've seen that concept taken a little bit further," says Daut. "Ten years ago and before, it was the men going to hunting camp, killing the big buck—that sort of thing. But now we're seeing more and more that during the summer these same groups of guys are coming back and bringing their families with them. The whole family is there for a week or two and really enjoys the place, and that's fantastic."

In other words, a leased property will be more likely to have users present throughout the year, an additional incentive for the absentee landowner wanting someone to keep an eye on the property.

Some precautionary steps can be taken to ensure that both the potential lessor and the lessee's interests are served when making the first foray into recreational leasing. Says Daut, "You'd want to have a formal hunting lease reviewed by a lawyer. Insurance is always an issue, but most clubs can get liability insurance."

As for agricultural leasing, two factors will most likely mean a greater number of farmers and ranchers in search of land: grazing restrictions on public lands fueled by environmental concerns, and urban sprawl. Pushed from national forests and farmlands bought up for subdivision development, these individuals may come knocking on the private landowner's door.

Wildcrafting

Popular in some areas of the country for years, wildcrafting has become a more familiar activity as the alternative medicine movement has gained momentum. Black cohosh, dogwood berries, birch bark, trillium, bloodroot, mayapple, and countless other items are bought and sold to be utilized in traditional and modern medicines.

For example, a compound from bloodroot is used in gingivitis medications. A plant called lobelia is utilized in over-the-counter products that help smokers kick their habit. While most wildcrafted materials bring only a few dollars per pound, the coveted items such as goldenseal and ginseng fetch considerably more. In recent years, for instance, wildcrafters have been able to sell dried ginseng root for up to \$500 per pound. Goldenseal has brought roughly \$25.

As with the collection of nursery materials, check into state and local laws before gathering such specimens, and never collect to the point that local plant communities are jeopardized.

A wooded acreage is more than trees. With some careful planning and networking among extension services, departments of agriculture, green industry representatives, and so forth, a woodlot owner may discover that loggers aren't the only ones interested in buying what's found there. It may soon become apparent that, just like the early settlers, a landowner's family can engineer a supplemental income from what might otherwise be overlooked.