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Penny wise and pound foolish

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va. In early December, an old mans fancy turns to thoughts of spring—the season on the farm when jolly Christmas is enjoying its 364-day vacation and work is back to being sweaty and humorless.

Whats looming large right now is the idea of planting 500 black walnut trees in our pastures next April. Black walnut is a high-value species thats grown primarily for lumber. A planting of walnuts should increase the value of the farm as they grow.

One-year-old seedlings from the Virginia Department of Forestry cost about \$160. The protective tubes and vegetation-suppressing mats cost another \$4 to \$5 per seedling, depending on size and type. I prefer the biodegradable models, but I dont want cattle or bears to eat them so I may have to stick with plastic.

If I take care of them during their first few years, I might project a 60 percent survival rate in 75 years. At that point, each harvestable tree could easily be worth \$1,000 as it stands in the field.

At that time, I will be 144 years old and eager to either cash out...or cash in.

I am not new to the idea of planting walnut trees on the farm. Thirty years ago, I dug in 100 one-year-old seedlings in a creek bottom next to where a single giant walnut reigned. Authorities told me that black walnuts liked sunny bottomland.

Hubris of my sort was too tempting. Smack down happened. During the next 13 years, three 100-year floods completely covered my little plantation, leaving the spunky saplings nicked, broken and bent. Bottomland is another name for floodplain.

And what burned me up was that this creek had never

flooded in anyones memory until I planted 100 trees.

A few survivors might still grade out as lumber-quality logs. The other 40 should still have some value to those eccentric woodworkers who see charm in defects and beauty in irregularities.

My disappointment in this capital venture has been slightly offset by hope inasmuch as the walnuts -- with the help of cooperating squirrels -- have seeded a next generation. Im hopeful their children dont mouth off and provoke the local floodies.

This time I intend to plant above the floodplain.

Now that I, too, am nicked, broken and bent, I decided to do most of the hole-digging by machine rather than by hand, foot, back, shovel, rock bar, spit and unimaginate cursing.

Accordingly, I found myself in the market for a 12-inch-diameter earth auger -- called a post-hole digger -- that I could attach to the back of my tractor and let its 60-year-old horses when theyre feeling their oats drill out the planting holes.

Over the years, Ive discovered that I know almost nothing about each piece of farm equipment Ive needed to buy. I usually learn the hard way that I should have purchased a different size and design.

To avoid this chronic mistake, I scooted around the Internet researching various tractor-mounted, helical augers. I was amazed...and dismayed...to discover dozens of manufacturers, specializations, sizes and configurations.

New auger prices ranged from about \$750 to \$1,500. Buy used, I said to myself, not new.

Whereupon Mr. Cheap gene kicked in. Mr. Cheap always travels with Mr. Shrewd, my self-delusional gene. This tag team has an unbroken record of victories...over me.

Used, of course, is cheaper than new. Cheaper is shrewder. Not-soold used could be a bargain. (You see how they work on

me.)

So I looked in several community buy-sell publications to see what used augers were available regionally. I was wary of *old* used augers, which were, I thought, likely to have worn joints, broken bits or bent shafts.

One ad caught my eye—a *new* 12-diameter auger and rig for only \$350. Why that's half price, Mr. Cheap and Mr. Shrewd shouted in my ear, one on each side. Who can resist stereo?

I called. Yes, it was heavy duty. Yes, it was really new, not slightly used. Yes, it had all its parts. Yes, it was really a 12 incher.

The seller said it was a Lowery that he'd bought at an auction with other equipment. I went to the company's website and found that a new rig delivered would cost about \$800. Cheap and Shrewd were licking their respective chops, and, occasionally, each others.

Lowery offers four auger-bits—one specifically designed for rocky soil like mine; the others suitable for dirt or sand. The seller said he didn't know which of the four he was selling even after I described each one in close-to-pornographic detail.

The seller lived about 2½ hours distant. On Saturday at 6:15 a.m., I left Blue Grass to drive over several snow-covered and actively hostile West Virginia mountains to keep my appointment.

I'd asked the seller to have the post-hole digger set up on his tractor so that I could see it operate. (At least, I had learned that in 30 years.)

When I arrived, he and I spent the next hour looking for his tools, exchanging right parts for wrong parts, bolting, greasing, oiling and adapting. The auger, finally, dug a hole in dirt.

It was not the rock-cutting bit I wanted, but it seemed to work good enough for digging a two-foot-deep hole for a walnut seedling.

It's not exactly what I want, I said. What would you take

for
it?

\$650, he said.

My eyes bugged out. Cheap and Shrewd carried on like a couple of bottle-starved infants. The price in your ad said \$350!

That wouldnt cover what I paid for it, he said.

Your advertised price is \$350, not \$650, I repeat ed
in the unlikely event that he had not understood what I
had just said.

No, its \$650.

I considered my position and his.

It was possible, of course, that the publication had misunderstood or misprinted his \$650 listing price. In which case, I was simply caught in the middle of just one of those things.

It was also possible that the seller was trying to shuffle me into paying a higher-than-advertised price now that I was into this deal for five hours of driving and an hour of donated set up.

Ive had the shuffle played on me before—a price is negotiated and then the seller raises it just before the deal is to close. Any buyer who gives in to the shuffle ends up paying more than he should, because he doesnt want to spend time starting from scratch with another seller.

If this was an honest mistake, the seller had the responsibility to correct it when I phoned before I made the journey. But he said he wasnt aware of the incorrect advertised price. That, too, I felt was his responsibility—to check the ad as it appeared. I *always* do that when Im a seller.

And if he was just trying to game me for more money, my best response was to walk away so that bad behavior is not rewarded.

I left, without deciding whether the seller was just negligent or a crook.

As I drove home, I thought about how I would have handled this situation if circumstances were reversed.

Would I feel an obligation to sell for an incorrect advertised price, because I had not bothered to read it in print?

If the error was \$100,000 rather than \$300, how ethically righteous would I be? (Im much more upstanding at the lower end of this spectrum. At five bucks, Im pretty ethical.)

I think I would have sold the post-hole digger for \$350, but Im not promising for sure. The loss would have taught me a lesson that I should have known.

Even if I would have not sold for \$350, I would have certainly handed over \$50 to cover the buyers gas spent in t he long drive over and back because of my mistake. Maybe I would have even added something for mileage.

And now Im thinking I should buy a *new* post-hole digger...and get what I want and give up on finessing sellers who know more than I do about the used equipment theyre selling.

Cheap and Shrewd object. Pricey and Warranty cheer. Im going to live large and splurge.

Butdoubt stirs. Maybe I should plant 100 trees ins tead of 500. While theyre out of the floodplain, a freak avalan che could wipe them out at any time. A blazing meteor could hit them dead center. The Red Sea might swallow them whole, drown-ded like Pharaohs army.

Wouldnt 50 trees as a test run be safer than 100?

And if Im only doing 50, or 25 or 10, maybe I sho uld just buy a new shovel and forget the new auger altogether.

Naaaah.

