

GRAZING GEESE

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(Editor's note: The following article was published on page 6 of the August 1952 issue of the West Virginia Conservation Magazine. It is based on actual experience in using a flock of geese to weed nursery seed beds at the West Virginia state nursery at Lesage.)

Take a gander at these geese. They're saving a lot of back-bending and a worthwhile sum of money at the State Forest Nursery at Lesage.

Turned loose in a bed of nursery stock, such as evergreens or multiflora rose, the geese go down the line pulling and breaking off the weeds and grass and leaving the stock undisturbed.

All that is necessary to confine them to the desired area is a three-foot high portable chickenwire fence.

Nursery Superintendent Hobart Woodrum figures that the 13 geese at Lesage have saved the taxpayers \$750 so far this season.

While the practice of using geese as weeders is not entirely new, it is believed to be new in this state. In recent years, berry growers in the West and Midwest have discovered that they could cut labor costs by using geese.

At present, there are 13 Chinese white geese on the labor force at Lesage. The project still is in an experimental stage, but Woodrum says there is reason to believe the experiment will succeed and he plans to double the flock next year, with a correspondingly greater saving.

Chinese white geese are used because they are smaller than most of their kind and are less likely to trample the nursery stock.

The 13 geese at the nursery now are the remnant of 15 goslings purchased early in March. By July 15, the geese, their feed and equipment, had cost \$47. Labor expended in their care amounted to about \$195. When it is figured that they have done work that would have cost 10 to 12 hundred dollars, the profit, or saving can be set at roughly \$750 to \$950.

Though the geese appear to be a success as nursery laborers, there is no possibility that they ever will entirely replace the old-fashioned back-bending, hand-pulling method of weeding. There are some jobs they just can not do.

In tiny, one-year-old stock, they are strictly for the birds. They are likely to trample it or clip it off before they recognize it for the tough, distasteful stuff it is. And there are some kinds of stock they will graze even when it is two years old or has grown to the usually safe size of 2-1/2 inches.

Geese seem to have a fondness for red pine, though they will not bother its close relatives such as white, Scotch, Virginia or short-leaf pine.

Besides the pines, geese have been used successfully at Lesage to weed beds of seedling Norway spruce, multiflora rose, and new rye from poplar beds while straw was on seedbeds during very early stages of germination.

About two and one-half million seedlings were produced last year on the 20-acre nursery at Lesage. The bill for weeding was approximately \$12,000. Just how much geese can reduce this remains to be seen.

Next step in the project will be use of geese as laborers at the other Forestry Division nursery at Parsons, Tucker County.

Another great potential use for geese, if the fox problem can be overcome, Woodrum believes, is in the Christmas tree plantations which are becoming increasingly popular with farmers as a means of supplementing income.

These plantations need mowing for the first two or three years to reduce competition. Even after the trees have grown big enough to fend for themselves, geese can be valuable in cropping grass and weeds that would be a fire hazard when dried.

Now the problem facing Woodrum is what to do with the geese when the growing season is over. Could they economically be kept over the winter? Or would it be better for them to spread Thanksgiving joy?