



AGRICULTURE & FORESTRY *HALL* *OF* **FAME**

WEST VIRGINIA | 2024

“ We had 12 acres of Christmas trees. When we cut a tree, I planted four walnut seeds beside that stump. I wanted this land to gradually become a walnut orchard. ”

JOHN KELSEY **SOUTHSIDE, WV**

John Kelsey grew up as the youngest of seven siblings on a family farm in Michigan. He attended Michigan State University, where he earned his bachelor's and master's degrees in physics.

His early career was in space biology, where he designed a green plant growth chamber and an algae culture unit. In 1965, he moved to West Virginia to work as an assistant professor of math and physics at West Virginia State College. During this time, he met his wife, Kay, and they purchased a 300-acre farm in Mason County, where they still live today.

John worked as an engineer at Kaiser Aluminum, which left little time for farming. In 1990, he retired from Kaiser and started his own business, Adena Automation, Inc., working another 25 years while Kay managed the farm.

However, between 1980 and 2000, John planted 18,000 white pines and 40 acres of black walnuts. Each winter, he pruned the walnut trees with “visions of veneer quality trees” running through his head. Around 2010, he shifted to hazelnuts due to Thousand Canker disease affecting black walnuts. Historically not grown east of Oregon due to Eastern Filbert Blight (EFB), Oregon and Rutgers University have developed EFB-resistant cultivars since 1960, which John is now testing with promising results.

John and Kay have written a book titled “How to Grow Veneer Quality Black Walnut on Your First Try (You Only Get One Try).” The book is available online and continues to evolve. John and his son also developed the Virtual Chainsaw computer program for forestry thinning and harvesting.

John's research and documentation of both hazelnut and black walnut trees have greatly contributed to their respective growing communities. He remains actively involved and is currently spearheading a new genetic improvement test plot on Blennerhassett Island. John is a member and director of The Walnut Council and the Northern Nut Growers Association. He received the Walnut Council Life Achievement Award in 2023.