

Ginseng

Written by: **Dan Whetzel**
 Photography by: **Lance C. Bell**

Ginseng, or “sang” as it is commonly called in Garrett County, has been prized as a valuable herb for centuries. Derived from the Chinese term “jen-shen” meaning “shaped like a man” or “man root,” the plant represents different qualities to those who seek it. The Chinese believed it to be a cure-all for the entire body while American Indians also valued its curative powers. Appalachians gathered the precious roots, called tassels, for medicinal purposes and as a cash crop to supplement family incomes. The number of ginseng products is increasing as contemporary consumers continue to be fascinated with the benefits associated with the plant.

Ginseng is a perennial plant that naturally grows to be more than one-foot tall and blooms in the summer. By fall, it ripens with red berries, each containing two seeds. A maturity time of six to eight years is required to reach a point when the roots, the most desirable part of the plant, may be harvested. And as domestic and foreign demand for ginseng increases to the present day, so do the ways in which it can be grown and harvested.

Americans quickly learned the monetary value of harvesting wild ginseng as an export commodity. From 1821-1899, the annual exportation of the wild root was 381,000 pounds, and the business continued to thrive throughout the 20th Century. The wild plant may

typically be located in cool, shady, mountainous hardwood forests like those of Garrett County and along the Appalachian Mountain Range. Wild ginseng refers to those plants found in the mountains that contain superior amounts of ginsenoside, a newly identified active ingredient of ginseng. The wild variety is harvested wherever it is found to be growing, and its roots can be distinguished from their domestic counterparts because of shape and size. The botanical name of both wild and domestic plants is *Panax Quinquefolius*. *Panax* is derived from the Greek word



The Ginseng plant

“panakos” meaning “cure-all.” Due to the added value placed on wild ginseng, over harvesting has occurred making it relatively rare and increasingly endangered. According to a recent U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services report, “Over harvest threatens wild populations of this species and the livelihoods of those citizens who depend on the plant as a source of income.” Consequently, today only 3.5% of ginseng exports involve wild harvest

roots. Concerns about ginseng’s survival caused states to restrict the collecting of the roots to those of at least five years of age. A myriad of other state regulations specify harvest dates and the minimum numbers of prongs that must be on the roots. The state of Maryland’s harvest season typically stretches from a date in August to December, requires a three prong root minimum, and a licensing process. Nearby West Virginia’s season ranges from August 15 to November 30 and specifies no minimum prong number.



Larry Harding, along with the young deer that has adopted his family, is surrounded by growing “Sang”. These ginseng plants show green berries – the berries will turn bright red in the Fall, ready for harvest.

The location of ginseng patches is a closely held secret, and they are guarded by gatherers. Increased incidents of poaching on federal lands have been received by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Harvest of native plants is prohibited within National Parks, yet the poaching of ginseng and other medicinal herbs “continues to rise.” Poaching is not restricted to government lands “but is also affecting private land owners.”

An alternative to wild ginseng is provided when seed stock from those plants is carefully distributed in a shaded forest. This type of ginseng, referred to as “Woods Grown” or “Wild Simulated,” must still compete with trees and other plants for nutrients because it is located in a natural environment without artificial fertilizers. Woods Grown roots take on the characteristics of wild ginseng with long, crooked tassels and verifiable growth rings. Another key ingredient in the growing of wild simulated ginseng is the natural canopy of the hardwood forest that provides for proper shading.

A third method of growing ginseng, termed “cultivated,” enables a faster harvest, usually within three or four years after planting the seeds. Since a highly controlled environment is provided, the roots do not have to strenuously compete for survival, and the tassels take on a straight and smooth shape. Many current ginseng products contain cultivated plants because they are more economical to purchase. The cultivated varieties are commonly grown in Wisconsin and Canada, far from their native habitats.

George Brady, a long time Kitzmiller, Maryland, resident grew into the sang quest as a family activity. “I had an uncle who ginsenged a lot, and I have a brother who is fantastic at finding it.” A typical inquiry from novices about the ginseng hunt is where it can be found. According to George Brady, some people seem to locate the plants easier than others because they learn of certain weeds that tend to grow near the desirable plants. “I was never really great at finding it,” admitted Mr. Brady, who decided to employ more scientific methods including a topographical

map for elevation marks. “You might go for a whole week and never find any. And then, you might find a big patch quickly. Once, I found a whole stack full in just a little bit of time. It’s like hunting for that pot of gold. You realize that it’s always over the next ridge. I climbed more than one steep gully thinking there was a big patch of ginseng on the other side.” George Brady also learned, “There is a big difference in ginseng. Domesticated is not worth nearly as much money. Each year when it comes up, there is a little curl on the root. And you can tell how old it is by how many curls the root has on it. When you see a plant with only two or three curls, it’s been cultivated and fertilized. People don’t pay near the money for it that way.”

Another local ginseng enthusiast is a Cresaptown, Maryland, resident Al Cunningham. “My dad dug ginseng; his dad dug ginseng, and it goes even further back in our family. I have been digging it in Maryland, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia for more than 40 years.” Al points out certain tips in locating the scarce plant. “Ginseng is always found on the morning side of the hill, and it is always in a place that provides 75% shade during the day.”

Al not only hunts ginseng as a hobby, but he also recommends it for medicinal purposes. “I take it every morning with juice. There is very little rheumatoid arthritis in Asian countries where ginseng is used. And I could tell you stories about people here who have benefited from it.”

Unfortunately, “Ginseng is about wiped out. Maybe once every 10 years you will find a virgin patch. I once found a patch near Oakland, Maryland, in a valley. I collected one third of the seeds and that amounted to about 3,000 of them. They covered a pool table. Then I replanted them. The most I ever heard about being found at one time is when my father worked in a Civilian Conservation Corps Camp in Pennsylvania. He found a patch that filled a 100 pound flour sack.”

J. Marshall Porter, local historian, reflected in a memoir, *A Tree of Memories*, that his father taught him to identify wild ginseng when he was a small boy growing up in the Cresaptown area of Allegany County, following World War I. “It was getting scarce then. Father told me about the early diggers who had dug all summer... The greed of a few men



Top photo: Al Cunningham holds a dried Ginseng root.

Bottom photo: Al shows a framed, dried Ginseng plant – the largest he has ever found. On the ground is a bag of dried “Sang”.

has caused many to lose good things that could have lasted for all.” Today’s scarcity of wild ginseng is directly related to over harvesting by gatherers of the past.

Fortunately for ginseng lovers, Garrett County resident Kenneth Harding collected the seeds of native wild plants more than 45 years ago before they became too scarce. Those seeds were used to establish Harding’s Ginseng Farm, located in the Appalachian Mountains of Western Maryland near the small town of Friendsville (population 550). The climate, terrain, and elevation of its location enabled the Hardings to “grow our crop in the woods in a natural way, under the canopy of the hardwood forest.” Only plants with a minimum of eight years growth are harvested, and many are more than ten years of age. According to Larry Harding, current owner, “Ours is a slow growing root that is comparable to wild ginseng in potency and quality. We start it from wild seed and root stock. The roots look a lot like wild ginseng and are of very high quality.”

Harding’s Ginseng Farm is the largest in the state of Maryland and perhaps the largest in the United States. Currently, 60 acres of ginseng grows on the mountainsides near Larry’s residence along Maryland Route 46. “We harvest 500 to 2,000 pounds, dry weight, per year. It just depends on how well it does. Three to five acres per year is typical for our harvest.”

Larry Harding’s biggest customers are located overseas. “We ship it directly to Asia. The ginseng leaves Friendsville and is shipped to Thurgood Marshall, Baltimore-Washington Airport in Baltimore, where it is inspected, weighed, and certified. But we get orders from all over the country and we do sell ginseng locally to regular customers who buy capsules, powder, and roots. I also buy wild ginseng from local hunters.”

Not just a licensed state of Maryland ginseng grower and dealer, Larry is a believer in its medicinal qualities. “Ginseng has medicinal values that we don’t really know about yet. It is a cure-all.” Larry reported that six wild ginseng roots were purchased at an auction in Asia for about \$120,000. “Why would Orientals be willing to pay so much money for ginseng if it didn’t have medical value?” Larry also believes that ginseng can also build up your body’s immune system.



Spring Ginseng – pods are just starting and will turn from green to bright red in the Fall.

Man-shaped ginseng roots are believed to have superior healing powers over less distinctively shaped roots, and therefore command premium prices. A single man-shaped root could sell for hundreds of dollars as compared to cultivated roots that sell for \$20 to \$30 per pound.

While many of the healing properties associated with ginseng in the past were typically communicated by word of mouth, researchers have taken notice of the herb. One recent study reported in the American Journal of Epidemiology suggested that 1,455 breast cancer patients between the years 1996-1998, tended to have a higher survival rate if they used ginseng regularly before the diagnosis. Individuals advocating alternative treatments for illnesses report that ginseng may be helpful in treating sugar diabetes and in preventing other maladies.

The use of ginseng in treating diabetes caught the attention of Chicago researchers who studied the effects of ginseng berries on mice suffering from high levels of blood sugar. Dr. Chun-Su Yang, a researcher at the University of Chicago's Tang Center for Herbal Medicine, reported encouraging results in the study because daily injections of ginseng berry extract restored normal blood sugar in the mice, an effect attributed to ginsenoside Re. Further studies on humans are expected soon.

The herb has also sparked interest among academics at Frostburg State University in Frostburg, Maryland. According to FSU Folklorist, Kara Rogers Thomas, "Ginseng has played an important role in the Appalachian Economy allowing regional residents to supplement their incomes by harvesting the wild plant and selling it to area dealers to market. Interestingly, unlike most wild plants and herbs harvested in the Eastern Mountains, ginseng was rarely used by regional residents. Historically, its value in Appalachia was purely monetary. Unfortunately, in many cases, that motive led to poor harvesting practices resulting in the loss of a significant number of ginseng plants. Today, botanists and social scientists are working together to educate local harvesters on the best practices of ginseng growth and

sustainability. Those goals are at the core of FSU's new interdisciplinary Ethnobotany Program which melds together research in botany, chemistry, geography and the social sciences."



Fall Ginseng plant with ripe red berries.

For residents and visitors who desire to view ginseng plants and learn more about them, a stop at Harding's Farm near Friendsville is in order. Harding's Ginseng Farm offers a variety of products for sale at the Friendsville location or by mail order including, ginseng wine, ginseng powder, shirts, apparel, health and beauty products, and ginseng roots. Larry also assists customers in growing their own ginseng. "I developed a kit to trouble shoot. Customers email me photos showing their problem, and I try to help them. I know what to do with what I see."

While the ways ginseng continues to be hunted, cultivated, harvested and marketed may vary, the quest to acquire the plant remains a popular hobby with mountain residents. Ginseng enthusiasts continue to be inspired to find that illusive patch that is just over the next hill.

The opinions expressed about the medicinal qualities of ginseng reported in the preceding article do not necessarily reflect the views of Mountain Discoveries.





*Shown above is a live Ginseng plant, dried Ginseng root, Ginseng wine, and wild Ginseng capsules.
Ginseng soap is also available.*