

Ginseng evokes images of Asian mystery, herbal power, and rejuvenation. Many years ago I was intrigued by expensive bottled ginseng roots in Chinese markets that promised strength and virility. Incidentally, everyone in my family agreed that the bottled root that we purchased tasted like dirt and did not make us feel any better from our present state. I recall Arizona tea's introduction of Ginseng flavored teas that promised health benefits to everyone. As the Endangered Herbal Watchdog, I have delved into the world of ginseng and have shattered many of my beliefs and assumptions.

First of all I am intrigued by the world ginseng economy over the centuries. Historically, American Ginseng, *Panax quinquefolius*, has been recognized as an important medicinal herb for commerce more than 200 years. According to a commerce book published in 1817, in 1770 the quantity of wild collected ginseng was 37 tons valued at \$5000. In 1806 the export increased to 224 tons with a value of \$139,000. The wild ginseng harvest was a significant income source for Early Settlers and Indians. In Gunn's Domestic Medicine published in 1835, mention is made of the importance of export to China.

GINSENG.

THIS root is called by the people in the country generally, for shortness, 'sang. It is found in great plenty among the hills and mountains of Tennessee, and brought into Knoxville daily for sale. Some few years back it was used as an article of commerce, and sent to the eastward in wagons as a commodity of foreign export, and afforded considerable employment and profit to the gatherers of it who resided near and among the mountains. It has latterly, however, fallen in price and value, as an article of exportation, and therefore, but little of it is brought in for sale.

This root was exported to China, and afforded to the shipper a handsome profit—generally selling it in the Chinese dominions for its weight in silver. The Chinese attributed great virtues to this root; so many indeed, that at one period—1748—the price at Peking is said to have been eight or nine times its weight in pure silver. They considered it as a sovereign remedy in all diseases incidental to their climate and country,

Even today despite the decades of success of ginseng agriculture in Wisconsin and other states, wild collected ginseng is still sought after as a precious commodity. In terms of organic standards, many ginseng farms are having problems with fungal diseases that affect root size and quality. The agricultural solution has been to

drench the soil with fungicide. Presently, wild grown dry roots are worth \$800 on the black market. Poaching and overharvesting has been a problem for decades.

There are 19 states that regulate the export of wild ginseng with licensing and harvesting restrictions. Sadly, there are many news reports of poaching and trespassing. One incident in 2007 generated wide publicity happened in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park where two poachers were caught and prosecuted. One was sentenced to 20 days in jail and fined a total of \$125 for possessing 18 wild ginseng roots and the other was sentenced to 15 days in jail and fined \$135 for possessing 77 roots. In general, fine amount is low relative to the value of ginseng and incarceration is not likely to be a deterrent. I see that publicity of convictions is not likely to lessen overharvesting of wild ginseng and poachers will continue to disrespect plants, property lines, and the efforts of conservationists. A nature loving acquaintance of mine reminisced fondly with no regret about harvesting with his father on public lands in the Adirondacks. He mentioned that his family's cultivation experiences with ginseng had been a failure. United Plant Savers advises plant stewards to keep secret locations of wild ginseng. Also, recommended is the harvest of the ripe red berries and clipping of the yellow tops to further camouflage the plant presence. The seed can be planted an inch below the soil surface in the vicinity of the parent plants.

Ginseng has a centuries old mystique that somewhat explains the high value. I was stunned to learn about ginseng dosing in Asia with what I consider to be a very high amount prescribed on a daily basis for many diverse conditions. The usual dosage is 3 grams a day. At a commodity wholesale price of \$1000 per pound, the math works out to at least \$2 per gram or \$6 per day. Keep in mind that the highest quality roots, at 5 to 7 years old, can cost up to \$15K per pound. For an average Chinese citizen, this is a significant health expense. As responsible Herbalists we can offer education that there are many substitutes for ginseng roots. The leaves and fruits have medicinal value and harvesting these will leave the plant alive. The price of the medicine is not worth it in terms of purchasing power and the incentive offered for poaching and other serious crimes. We need to advocate backyard herbalism. As Herbalists we know there are many plant alternatives. Our common weeds such as nettles, dandelions, chickweed, burdock, and mullein have profound health benefits that are equivalent or better than ginseng. We need to continue promote the value of our weeds as effective medicines.

In summary, ginseng is a highly priced medicinal herb that is consumed at high doses for long duration. The history of the past centuries shows a constant trend of overharvesting from the wild. Cultivation has not been the solution. Rosemary Gladstar's book on Herbal Recipes for Vibrant Health has a thoughtful statement. "It's futile to try to become healthier using herbs that may themselves be suffering as a result of overharvesting and habitat destruction." We need to dispel the myth that this revered and expensive plant is potent and educate the public on medicinally effective herbal alternatives to ginseng.



Menu Items
food & nutrition

Explore Drinks ▾

Fat-Free Superfruit Power
Smoothie with Ginseng **Nettles**

