Ginseng, Goldenseal, and Other Native Roots

HORTICULTURE TECHNICAL NOTE

Abstract: Native U.S. ginseng (and related species), goldenseal, and other medicinal roots are exported or used domestically in products regulated by the 1994 Dietary Supplement Health and Education Act. Most such crops are raised under contract by experienced growers. Some roots are organically raised. Since 2002 U.S. federal law has reserved the commercial term “ginseng” for Panax species.

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October 2004
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Introduction
America has exported native ginseng to the Orient for almost 300 years. Ginseng shares with several other woodland species of eastern North America (among them goldenseal, black cohosh, and blue cohosh) the distinction of having close relatives in eastern Asia that are recognized as medicinal plants in the Chinese pharmacopoeia.(1) Ginseng of the family Araliaceae, goldenseal and black cohosh of Ranunculaceae, and blue cohosh of Berberidaceae are all commercially traded on world botanicals markets. Other plants in the family Araliaceae—including native sarsaparilla and imported Eleutherococcus (“Siberian ginseng”)—have found favor with dietary supplement manufacturers because of their ginseng association. Since 1998, the market for medicinal herbs has declined precipitously, down 12% in 1999, another 15% in 2000, and a further 21% in 2001.(2) According to the latest figures for the 52 weeks ending January 4, 2004,
both dollar and unit sales of ginseng were down approximately 24% in 2003. A larger majority of herbal subcategories, including ginseng, experienced sales declines in 2003, compared with declines in 2002. Black cohosh root was the exception, with sales growing 27.4% in 2002 and 26.2% in 2003. (3)

Until recently, trade in plant species native to North America was almost entirely supplied by wild-gathering. Now, encouraging farm production is part of a concerted effort by conservation groups, as well as government agencies, to preserve remnant wild populations of rare native plants, while accommodating the demand for raw materials by the dietary supplement industry. On August 13, 1999, new U.S. Fish & Wildlife export restrictions on wild and “wild-simulated” ginseng roots went into effect. The purpose of the new regulations is to ensure that ginseng plants are not harvested prematurely (before seed production). State permits to harvest wild ginseng customarily require mature seeds to be left in the hole from which the root is dug.

New growers will not find published production budgets for most native roots, because existing growers consider such information a trade secret. Production budgets for the three common methods of raising ginseng (shade-cloth, woods-grown, and wild-simulated) that were published by Miller (1985) and Hankins (1999) are now out of date. Hankins identified wild-simulated as the best method for American ginseng growers, because of lower production costs and maximum returns.

Raising a trial crop first is very good advice. Medicinal root crops are perennials (rather than annuals like grains) and, once established, typically take three to five years before they are ready to harvest. Propagation from seed, generally not recommended, is complex and time-consuming, requiring specialized facilities such as greenhouses and labs. Harvest requirements often lead American growers to build or modify specialized equipment, and on-farm drying facilities are usually necessary for root crop production. Security is the first concern of ginseng growers, because secluded ginseng patches are often the targets of thieves—especially as the ginseng nears maturity.

The herbal industry has consolidated rapidly in the past five years and moved production out of the U.S. Only a few niches are filled by independent growers.

**Ginseng (Panax species)**

American ginseng (Panax quinquefolium L.) is a fleshy-rooted deciduous perennial native to cool and shady hardwood forests of North America, ranging from Quebec south to northern Florida and west to Arkansas. In the past decade ginseng has become increasingly scarce in its native habitat. When prices for wild American ginseng skyrocketed in 1996, secluded stands were quickly overrun by root hunters.

Asia imports both wild-harvested and cultivated American ginseng. In 1997 the U.S. legally exported 527,547 pounds of cultivated ginseng roots and 22,929 pounds of wild roots. (4) In 1998 Wisconsin alone produced almost 2 million pounds, but production in 1999 in that state fell to 1 million pounds (almost all for export), while Canadian production rose to a total of 4,615,000 pounds. (5) Since 1999 U.S. export production has plummeted.

Differences between Panax quinquefolium L. and Panax ginseng L. (Asian ginseng) are based on consumer perceptions, uses in traditional Chinese medicine (one is classified as “cool,” the other as “hot”), and marketing strategies, rather than pharmacological studies using Western methodology. Asian consumers have a distinct preference for wild, rather than cultivated, ginseng—of whatever Panax species. U.S. consumers have a decided preference for convenience and do not make distinctions among products based on species, production methods, or origins—as long as the label says “ginseng.” Chinese customers get such phytomedicines from traditional healers; Americans buy them in capsules from the shelves of chain stores. The potential size of the American market for P. quinquefolium in unprocessed form is unknown, but is probably small. American consumers tend to shop on price alone and prefer easy-to-use capsules and lozenges. It is questionable whether U.S. consumer preferences can be shifted much to favor unprocessed forms of ginseng supplied by local growers.

Since wild forms of ginseng are rare in Asia, wild (or “wild-simulated”) P. quinquefolium from the U.S. is highly marketable there. Extension Specialty Crops Specialist Andy Hankins (6), who visited China in 1999, found perfect...
“hands” of U.S. ginseng being used as expensive gifts; he recommended that U.S. exporters pay more attention to protecting the “hands” from damage in shipment, rather than just shipping them in barrels as a commodity. (A “hand” is a complete, unbroken ginseng root with its branches resembling human body parts.) Hankins developed and published one of the few production budgets for various methods of producing ginseng in the U.S. (6)

In keeping with his 1997 prediction that Chinese production of American ginseng would make China self-sufficient in farm-raised grades by the year 2000 (7), Hankins reported in May 2000 that cultivated American ginseng is now imported via San Francisco from China. (8) Manufacturers of ginseng preparations marketed in the U.S. prefer to use cheaper grades of imported Asian ginseng (P. ginseng), and now American ginseng (P. quinquefolium). The cheaper grades of both species are those produced quickly under shadecloth.

Hong Kong’s becoming part of The People’s Republic of China in 1998 has complicated U.S. access to the Chinese market for ginseng. Hankins reports (8) that the main problem is getting paid. There is no recourse if a deal goes sour. Demand in other Asian countries is locally or regionally met. Asian dealers now want only wild or “wild-simulated” U.S. ginseng, easily identified by an experienced botanicals dealer. This product is customarily marketed through private networks. Wild and wild-simulated ginsengs come from natural woods in the Appalachian mountain ranges of the eastern U.S. (parts of Pennsylvania, New York, Kentucky, Tennessee, and West Virginia). A small amount comes from similar terrain in the Missouri and Arkansas Ozarks. Contrary to a common misconception, marketable ginseng is not produced by alley cropping or agroforestry plantation methods, except in very small amounts in the Pacific Northwest for local use. The sustainability of continued or increased wild harvest is questionable. As a result of these market factors, many former commercial ginseng growers in the U.S. and Canada have switched to other medicinal root crops or quit entirely.

The United States monitors all trade in ginseng, whether wild or cultivated, within its borders and for export. All dealers or ginseng growers are required to register with the regulatory agency.
in their state. There are also state regulations on collecting ginseng seed from wild stands. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (9) can provide a list of state agencies that regulate ginseng.

Historically, more than 95% of commercial ginseng grown in the U.S. for export to Asia has been cultivated under shadecloth in Marathon County, Wisconsin. Now countries such as Canada, New Zealand, Australia (in Tasmania), Ecuador, and Chile, as well as China, have developed the capacity to compete for local and Pacific Rim markets.

Diseases of ginseng include root rot (early blight) and *Alternaria panax* (ginseng blight). According to Hankins (10), intensively cultivated plants are highly susceptible to ginseng blight. In fact, disease problems associated with shadehouse-grown ginseng are so devastating that using fungicides to save an otherwise organically grown crop near the end of its multi-year cycle is a common industry practice. Wild ginseng plants are rarely affected. The greatest danger for wild-simulated ginseng growers and for caretakers of wild patches is not disease but human theft.

Many companies can supply seed or plants for propagation. It may be best, however, to obtain healthy rootlets and raise one’s own seed crop to avoid diseases. State regulations on harvesting seed from wild stands must be observed.

In 2002 the long-running Panax listserv for commercial ginseng growers ceased operations when its moderator retired. See Web Resources, below, for currently available information on the Internet. A USDA bulletin on ginseng culture, published in 1928, is now available on the Internet.

**Panax relatives**

Other species in the same family as ginseng include *Eleutherococcus senticosus* Maxim., an aggressive 9-foot-tall woody shrub native to Siberia (formerly marketed in the U.S. as a dietary supplement and weight-loss remedy); Devil’s club (*Oplopanax horridus* Miq.), native to the Pacific Northwest and Alaska; and sarsaparilla (*Aralia L. spp.*), native to North America (particularly the southeastern U.S.). None of these are recognized in the Chinese pharmacopoeia as “-seng.” The 2002 U.S. Farm Bill prohibits marketing any non-*Panax* species as “ginseng”; the status of all dietary supplements is under review by the National Organic Program.

**Goldenseal**

Goldenseal (*Hydrastis canadensis* L.), a member of the buttercup family (Ranunculaceae), has approximately the same native range and environmental requirements as ginseng (moist woodlands of the eastern U.S.). A perennial, goldenseal has an erect hairy stem that grows to about a foot in height, with three or four yellowish scales at the base of the plant. The rhizome (a root-like underground stem), the part used for medicinal purposes, is the principal source of revenue, though the leaves are also gathered and marketed.

Goldenseal is threatened with extinction over much of its natural range (12, 13), and many states have passed regulations to discourage wild collecting. Goldenseal is a major focus of the privately-funded United Plant Savers (UpS) (14), which sponsors botanical sanctuaries and other native plant conservation efforts.

A report on the first comprehensive study of goldenseal cultivation, conducted by a Canadian research team, appeared in 2001.(15) A 1994 study by Dr. Jeanine Davis (16), North Carolina State University Extension, on methods for accelerating production of plants from rootlets rather than seed or root division, gave mixed results. Dr. Davis has also studied goldenseal diseases. Mulch studies on goldenseal have shown better stands and fewer diseases with sawdust, especially composted sawdust, than with straw mulch. Straw mulch promoted slugs, according to studies in both North Carolina and Washington State.(17)

Goldenseal has been marketed as an immune system stimulant. Cheaper substitutes for goldenseal are now on the market. The notion that it masks drug-use tests, while unfounded, has undoubtedly contributed to its marketability.

Much of the information in the USDA bulletin *Goldenseal Under Cultivation*, published in 1949, applies to ginseng as well. This publication has especially useful suggestions on organically acceptable fertility management. See Further Resources below.

Although reliable information about the yield
of roots is difficult to find, successful
growers of goldenseal (in 1949) re-
ported dry root yields of 2,000 pounds
per acre at 5 years from seed. Yields of
1,000 to 2,500 pounds of dried golden-
seal root per acre (at 3 to 5 years) have
been reported for goldenseal under
intensive cultivation.(17) Like gin-
seng, cultivated goldenseal is subject
to increased disease pressures.(18)

Prices for goldenseal fluctuate, de-
pending on supply and demand.
Since plants started from seed take
about five years to reach harvestable
stage, predicting future returns on in-
vestment is difficult. Several sources
for goldenseal rhizomes are provided
below. After initial establishment,
goldenseal roots and seeds can be
saved for propagating new beds.

Black Cohosh
A medicinal root herb in the same
family as goldenseal is black cohosh
(Cimicifuga racemosa Elliot). Steven
Foster describes black cohosh in
Herbal Renaissance (19) as a Native
American remedy used in tincture
form for female problems and as an
aid in childbirth.

Universities have just begun research
on black cohosh as an agricultural
enterprise. Purdue University, which
earlier pioneered much new-crops research, has
closed its New Crops Center, but maintains a me-
dicinal herb “demonstration plot” that includes
black cohosh.

The University of Kentucky’s New Crop Op-
portunities Center, headed by R. Terry Jones
(20), Department of Horticulture, is currently
assessing the potential of a number of Kentucky
wildflowers for commercial floral crop produc-
tion.(21) Black cohosh is included in a study of
“native plant and underutilized landscape plant
species” at one of its research stations. Jones
has published a useful guide to seed and root
sources for black cohosh (as well as blue cohosh,
ginseng, and goldenseal) for Kentucky growers,
www.ca.uky.edu/agc/pubs, as well as other
Web resources.

A major horticultural study on black cohosh
began in 2001, under the auspices of the Center
for Phytonutrient and Phytochemical Studies (a
research consortium of the University of Mis-
souri—Columbia and the Missouri Botanical
Garden), funded by a substantial grant from the
U.S. National Institutes of Health. The name of
the study is “Identification and Characterization
of Botanicals.” Research sites include the Mis-
souri Botanical Gardens, St. Louis; Southwest Re-
search Center, Mt. Vernon; and the Shaw Nature
Research, Gray Summit. The initial experiment
is to answer questions about when, how much,
and under what conditions (including stress) the
herb produces certain phytochemicals (the “ac-
tive principles”). For current information, see
the Web site www.phyto-research.org/identifica-
tion, or contact the Center.(22)
While the University of Kentucky material notes that Black Cohosh seed is very difficult to germinate and must be absolutely fresh (23), and I have found it of intermediate difficulty, Foster considers it easy to propagate and grow...

...given a moderately rich, somewhat-moist, shady situation. Propagation is achieved by sowing seeds in a well-prepared seedbed as soon as ripe in autumn for germination the following spring, or by division of the roots in early spring or autumn, after the leaves begin to fade. Plants should be given two-foot spacings. Black Cohosh thrives under cultivation in lightly shaded conditions and is adaptable to relatively poor, acidic, rocky woodland soils. The plant does best, however, in a relatively rich, moist woodland soil. Average weight of the matted roots is four to eight ounces. No information on yields is available, but ... [might be] about 3,000 pounds per acre.(19)

As with many native perennial seeds, germination rates may be quite low. Seed sources compiled by the University of Kentucky are listed below. Richard A. Miller advises sun-curing the split roots, which are then cut and sifted。(24)

**Blue Cohosh**

Sales of blue cohosh (Caulophyllum thalictroides L. Michx.), another root with traditional medicinal uses, are currently very small, but increasing. Practically no scientific research has been done on this species. Regarding culture, Foster notes:

Blue cohosh can be propagated by seeds or root division. The seeds can be planted in midsummer as soon as the blueberry-like fruits ripen. Fall division of the root stocks is also a good means of propagation. Plants grown from seed will have to be in the ground for up to five years before the roots can be harvested. (19)

This plant likes a humus-rich soil in deciduous forests with a pH of 4.5 to 7 (acid to neutral). It seems to like at least 75 percent shade, and can be grown in a similar habitat as ginseng and goldenseal. Blue cohosh is not subject to pests and requires a minimum of care.(23)

Unless fresh seed is planted in the fall, seed germination rates may be quite low. Seed sources include Richters, Johnny’s, and Horizon Herbs (see below). Miller advises sun-curing the split roots, which are then cut and sifted。(24)

**Conclusion**

Pioneers of herbal medicines envisioned a health care system with experienced herbal practitioners prescribing holistic courses of treatment. The actuality took a decidedly different turn when medicinal herb producers found themselves competing on the world botanicals market to provide raw materials for mass-marketed products. Inadequate basic research on production (including improved cultivars) hampered new growers.(25) Mark Wheeler of Pacific Botanicals (26) noted in 2000 the accelerated trend toward contract farming, even as new legislation curbed wild harvesting. With uncertain markets, it is now highly doubtful whether even experienced farmers should make medicinal herb crops a significant part of their production.
References


   Panax-owner@cariboo.bc.ca
   RWBrunn@aol.com

   enviro-news@warp.nal.usda.gov


9) U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Office of Management Authority 4401 N. Fairfax Drive

10) Anthony Hankins Virginia Cooperative Extension Box 9081 Virginia State University Petersburg, VA 23806 804-524-5962

    Order from Bright Mountain Books, 138 Springdale Road, Asheville, NC 28803.


14) United Plant Savers (UpS) P.O. Box 400 East Barre, VT 05649 802-496-7053 802-496-9988 FAX info@plantsavers.org
    www.plantsavers.org


16) Dr. Jeanine Davis
    Mountain Horticultural Crops Research and Extension Center
    Fletcher, NC 28732
    704-684-3562

    panax@cariboo.bc.ca; Jeanine_Davis@ncsu.edu


Further Resources

Ginseng


Panax relatives


Available for $5.00 from NY State Ginseng Assn., P.O. Box 127, Roxbury, NY 12474.

Goldenseal


Black cohosh


Blue cohosh


Sources of propagation materials

For an assessment of customer satisfaction with seed/plant suppliers, see the Web site http://gardenwatchdog.com.
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<td>2. Barney's Ginseng Patch</td>
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<td>5. Nancy Crouse</td>
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<td>6. Dabney Herbs</td>
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<td>7. Elixir Farm Botanicals</td>
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<td>8. Goodwin Creek Gardens</td>
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1. American Ginseng Gardens  
P.O. Box 168-D  
404 Mtn. Meadow  
Flag Pond, TN  37657  
423-743-3700

2. Barney’s Ginseng Patch  
433 Hwy. B  
Montgomery City, MO  63361  
573-564-2575

3. Bill Slagle  
Route 3, Box 186  
Bruceton Mills, WV  26525  
304-379-3596

4. Companion Plants  
7242 North Coolville Ridge Road  
Athens, OH  45701  
740-592-4643  
740-593-3092  
complant@frognet.net  
www.companionplants.com

5. Nancy Crouse  
P.O. Box 141  
Mozelle, KY  41749  
606-374-3374

6. Dabney Herbs  
P.O. Box 22061  
Louisville, KY  40252  
502-893-5198 (ph./FAX)

7. Elixir Farm Botanicals  
General Delivery  
Brixey, MO  65618  
Contact: Shanti  
417-261-2393  
417-261-2355 FAX  
efb@aristotle.net  
www.elixirfarm.com  
Biodynamically certified organic seed of native and Chinese medicinal herbs.

8. Goodwin Creek Gardens  
P.O. Box 83  
Williams, OR  97544
800-846-7359
www.goodwinckreekgardens.com

9. Linda Heller
HC-62, Box 841
Confluence, KY 41730
606-672-6444
Call for availability for current year.

10. Holbrook, Charles D.
P.O. Box 561
Brodhead, KY 40409
606-758-8814

11. Horizon Herbs
P.O. Box 69
Williams, OR 97544
541-846-6704
541-846-6233 FAX
herbseed@chatlink.com
www.chatlink.com/~herbseed

Horizon Herbs publications include titles on Mediterranean herbs, echinacea, Chinese herbs, burdock, St. Johnswort, English herbs, and milk thistle. May be purchased separately or as a set. Credit cards accepted.

12. Hsu’s Ginseng Enterprises
16819 Co. Hwy. W.
P.O. Box 509
Wausau, WI 54402-0509
800-826-1577
info@hsuginseng.com

13. Jelitto Perennial Seeds
125 Chenoweth Lane
Louisville, KY 40207
502-895-0807
502-895-3934 FAX
www.jelitto.com

14. Johnny’s Selected Seeds
Foss Hill Road
Albion, ME 04910
207-437-4301
800-437-4290 FAX
commercial@johnnyseeds.com
www.johnnyseeds.com/

15. Lake’s Botanicals
2029 Poindexter Road
Cynthiana, KY 41031
859-234-6884
lakefarm@kyk.net

No catalog; fall delivery only.

16. Pickerell’s Ginseng Farm
258 Ennis Mill Road
Hodgenville, KY 42748
270-358-4543

17. Red River Ginseng
220 Neff Road
Hazel Green, KY 41332
606-662-4091
Ginseng@eastky.com

18. Richter’s Herbs
357 Hwy. 47
Goodwood, Ontario, Canada
LOC 1A0
905-640-6677, ext. 201
roberts@richters.com
www.richters.com

19. Sandy Mush Herb Nursery
316 Surratt Cove Road
Leicester, NC 28748-5517
828-683-2014
www.sandymushherbs.com
Catalog on-line.

20. Well-Sweep Herb Farm
205 Mt. Bethel Road
Port Murray, NJ 07865
908-852-5300

Electronic resources:

www.hort.purdue.edu/newcrop/ncnu02/v5-491.html

North Carolina State University Extension factsheets on ginseng and goldenseal
www.ces.ncsu.edu/hil/spcrop-index.html

Growing Ginseng (USDA Farmers Bulletin No. 2201)
www.penpages.psu.edu/penpages_reference/29401/2940169.html
Natural Foods Merchandiser  
nfm@newhope.com  
www.nfmtradezone.com  
Can provide up-to-date marketing statistics for herb crops for $200/yr. access fee.

Richters information on growing herbs  
www.richters.com

The Herb Growing and Marketing Network  
www.herbnet.com

University of Kentucky Extension factsheet on medicinal herbs  
www.ca.uky.edu/agc/pubs

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October 2004  
©NCAT 2004  
Edited by Paul Williams  
Formatted by Ashley Rieske

The electronic version of Ginseng, Goldenseal and Other Native Roots is located at:  
HTML  
http://attra.ncat.org/attra-pub/ginsgold.html  
PDF  