

Ginseng ^[1]

Ginseng

by Stephen C. Compton, 2006



Ginseng plant in Nella, North Carolina, 2005. Image from Flickr user Mandie.

American ginseng (*Panax quinquefolium*) grows wild in the deciduous [forests](#) ^[3] of North Carolina's [Appalachian Mountains](#) ^[4] as well as in the upper [Piedmont](#) ^[5]. Often found on the north slopes of heavily shaded coves, distinctive whorls of five leaves, bright red berries, and yellow leaves in the fall make ginseng easily distinguishable from other plants. The mature root, growing up to eight inches long, looks much like a human figure, leading some to call the tuber "man-root." In North Carolina Mountain parlance, ginseng is sometimes called "sang," "seng," or "sangtone."

The native peoples of North America had long utilized the attributes of ginseng when [colonists](#) ^[6], the first being a Jesuit missionary priest named [Joseph Lafitau](#) ^[7] in 1715, began to value the plant. Highly prized for its purported medicinal and aphrodisiac qualities, nearly 400 tons of ginseng were exported, mostly to Asia, from the United States in 1824. Even the famed fur trader [Daniel Boone](#) ^[8], whose family once resided in present-day [Davie County](#) ^[9], collected ginseng. The extraordinary value of ginseng is seen in an advertisement, dated 1 Apr. 1927, for roots and herbs by Statesville's [Sig Wallace](#) ^[10], who offered 1 to 10 cents per pound for other roots but the relatively phenomenal price of \$10 a pound for wild, carefully collected ginseng.

As wild growths of ginseng are diminishing in quantity throughout North America, attempts at cultivating the plant have been made. Because the North Carolina Mountains remain a significant source of wild ginseng for both domestic and foreign markets, the [Plant Industry Division](#) ^[11] of the North Carolina Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services ^[12], working with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service ^[13], runs the Plant Conservation Program to regulate ginseng's trade within and export from the state. The trade in wild ginseng brings in over \$3 million annually to the state; approximately 3,000 ginseng collectors, often Mountain folk who depend on the income to supplement a subsistence lifestyle, receive at least \$200 to \$300 per pound from the more than 40 permit-holding dealers, who mostly export to places such as Singapore and Hong Kong. As wild ginseng is a legally protected plant, considered by the state to be of "special concern," collection is prohibited during the summer growing season, and only roots at least five years old and with three prongs may be sold. Collection is prohibited in state and national parks.

Additional Resources:

Lafitau, Joseph. *Mémoire présenté à Son Altesse Royale Mgr. le duc d'Orléans, régent de France: concernant la précieuse plante du gin-seng de Tartarie découverte en Amérique*. Montreal: Daniel et Compagnie. 1858.
https://archive.org/stream/cihm_36097#page/n5/mode/2up ^[14] (accessed July 9, 2012).

North Carolina Plant Industry Division, Dept. of Agriculture and Consumer Services. *Annual Report*. Raleigh, N.C. 2009-2011. p. 39.
<https://digital.ncdcr.gov/documents?search=%22%22Annual%20report%2C%20Plant%20Industry%20Division%22%22&searchtypes=Metadata|Full%20text&applyState=true> ^[15] (accessed July 9, 2012).

§ An Act to Prevent the Destruction of Ginseng in the Mountains of North Carolina. Public laws of the State of North Carolina, passed by the General Assembly 1866-1867.
(passed January 28, 1867). <https://digital.ncdcr.gov/Documents/Detail/public-laws-of-the-state-of-north-carolina-passed-by-the-general-assembly-1866-1867/1952735?item=2027206> ^[16] (accessed July 9, 2012).

§ 3502. Ginseng growing on land of another. Revisal of 1905 of North Carolina: prepared under chapter three hundred and fourteen of the Laws of one thousand nine hundred and three. <https://digital.ncdcr.gov/Documents/Detail/revisal-of-1905-of-north-carolina-prepared-under-chapter-three-hundred-and-fourteen-of-the-laws-of-one-thousand-nine-hundred-and-three-v.1/3791652> ^[17] (accessed July 9, 2012).

Image Credits:

"Ginseng." May 29, 2005 in Nella, North Carolina. Flickr user Mandie.<https://www.flickr.com/photos/captivated/92387620/> [2] (accessed July 9, 2012).

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