

# Digging Ginseng

## *A Cash Crop for the Mountain People*



***The emerald green leaves of the ginseng plant***

used to treat convulsions, dizziness, nervous disorders, colds, fevers, headaches, and shortness of breath, as well as to stop the flow of blood from wounds. The roots, when fully dried, can bring hundreds of dollars a pound at fur-trading or general store businesses that buy ginseng roots.

Because of its popularity, digging ginseng has resulted in over-collection and the government has now regulated a season when ginseng can be gathered. The plant was in danger of becoming extinct before these new laws came into effect. The collecting season in Virginia runs from September 1 through December 31, giving ample time for harvesting and replanting of the red berries, which grow in the crotch of the plant.

One of the mountain pastimes that always fascinated me was the annual end-of-summer pilgrimage to dig ginseng. Much like hunting morel mushrooms, the folks that hunt ginseng are very secretive about where they go to find the plant. Although the sport is still popular today, years ago it was a big part of the mountain people's lives because they could earn a living at it. Others merely supplemented their incomes with the valuable root, buying little extras that farm work didn't provide.

Ginseng, or "zang" as the locals call it, is a native mountain plant whose highly prized root is dug, dried, sold and exported to Asian countries where it is used as an alleged aphrodisiac and heart stimulant. It is also in demand here in the United States as a tonic that they claim has health benefits. Native American Indians believed it prevented female conception, and used a root tea to treat rheumatism and vomiting. The root has also been

One person who dug ginseng her whole life was Tammy Clark Mays. She remembers as a young girl growing up on Irish Creek, going with her entire family to look for “zang.” It was brought home to dry and then sold to the proprietor of the Cornwall General Store for two to three dollars a pound, which was good money back then. Now, because of its scarcity, it takes a lot more effort and time to find the plant, making it more valuable.



**Tammy Mays showing a double ginseng root**

Tammy recalls going out with nothing but a sharp stick and digging it anytime she wanted to.

“It was growing wild all over the mountainsides and all we had to do was go up in the woods where it was dark and moist, usually on the west side of the ridge, and dig as much as you wanted. We sold most of it but kept a little back for ourselves, too. There wasn’t any better medicine than ginseng root to cure a stomachache or the cramps. We’d just chew on a little piece of it and before you knew it, the pain would go away.”

Tammy said they also dug May apple, goldenseal and lady slipper roots but they didn’t bring as much money. She said they usually dug the roots in the fall of the year and gathered it right up until the time the leaves started to fall off. “They always said if you found a root shaped exactly like a man it would bring a big price. Ginseng reminded me of a man the way it grew; straight and tall. We’d always be on the lookout for the biggest roots we could find. You could tell what size the roots were going to be by the number of prongs the plant had on it. The more prongs, the bigger the root. We were always looking for four or five-pronged plants because we knew they would bring more money. Once I brought some of the red berries home and planted them, hoping they would grow. They did come up but later died because of the sun. Ginseng has to be planted in dark, shady, moist ground.”

Ron Richardson of Waynesboro, who was a frequent contributor of articles for the Backroads newspaper, was also an avid “zang” hunter. He gave more detailed information about ginseng; it is a deep rooted, long lived, herbaceous plant that grows in the shade of tulip poplar, walnut, basswood and other hardwood trees. It is rarely found in areas rich in pine trees. The soil is too acidic for ginseng to thrive. It is also found in the company of black cohosh, yellow lady slipper, jack in the pulpit, trillium, wild ginger, and Solomon seal. The adult plant, eight years and older, will typically be twelve to eighteen inches tall with four stems of five leaflets each. The stems

and berry stalk radiate from the same point at the top of the pencil size plant stalk. In September, the knot of twenty or so berries turn bright red, and by October the leaves turn into a beautiful shade of pale golden yellow. When heavy frost burns the plants down, a scar is left on the neck at the top of the root. Counting these scars gives the approximate age of the root. Ron said the oldest one he ever found was a veteran of thirty-four years and was growing out of a crack on top of a large boulder.



***A cluster of red berries on a mature ginseng plant***

Ron also gave a few good conservation rules. “Dig only mature roots and only after the berries turn red. Be careful not to dig up the little plants, which are often found underneath the larger ones. Bury the berries one to two inches deep in the general vicinity of the mother plant. Each red berry contains two or three flat seeds that take around eighteen months to spout. If the seeds dry out during that time, they will not make it. Some people take the berries home with the intentions of planting them in a new location. Unfortunately, many of these seeds end up drying out in a jar and thus do not survive. If you do want to save a few berries to start a new patch, bury them in damp sand in a plastic container kept in the refrigerator. Check them often enough to make sure they don’t dry out until planted. A mature ginseng plant does not flower and seed for four to five years. Add the nearly two years it takes them to germinate, and it quickly become apparent why the plants are in danger of over collection.”

The first year, plants that grow from these seeds look nothing like they will as adults. They are one to two inches tall with three small triangular shaped leaves and a skinny two-inch long

root. Each year, the plant and root will grow larger, if it can survive hungry mice, land clearing, urban sprawl, floods and “zang” hunters.

The average size mature root will weigh about one third of an ounce; it takes at last three ounces of green roots to make one ounce of dry.

Ginseng’s proper species name is *Panax quinquefolium*. Panax from the word panacea, a cure-all, and the word schinseng, which in Chinese means man-form or man-shape, for the root that divides at the bottom, resembling a man’s legs. Other common names it goes by are dwarf groundnut, five fingers, garantogen, garantogere, gensang, grantogen, jinshard, manroot, man’s health, ninsin, redberry, tartar root and “zang.”



**A nice-sized ginseng root**

know if you like to try your hand at digging ginseng. Inquire at the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services in Richmond to see when the season in your area starts. In Virginia the season starts on September 1<sup>st</sup> and runs through December 31<sup>st</sup>. Digging is

My own memories of hunting ginseng came from Tammy Mays, who took me on several outings to find the elusive plant. Tammy had a powerful “nose” for knowing where to look for “zang,” and sure enough, the two times we went up in the mountains, we came home with some roots in a bag. Some years later, my good friends John and Charlotte Hodge and I went ginsenging and came home with a goodly stash. I remember the day Charlotte and I drove over to Klotz Brothers in Staunton to cash in our dried roots. A bunch of men standing around in bib overalls, chewing and spitting tobacco juice, watched us come in and kind of snickered as we told the proprietor we wanted to sell some “zang.” But when we dumped our roots on the scale, they quit laughing! We ate at the Chinese restaurant in Waynesboro every Sunday afternoon that entire winter on our profits.

prohibited from January 1<sup>st</sup> through August 31<sup>st</sup>. But ginseng can be harvested year-round on your own property. Obtain the appropriate permits before digging the plant on National Forest and State lands. Hunting in the Shenandoah national Park or Blue Ridge Parkway property is strictly forbidden; ginseng is completely protected on these lands.

Also, it is a good idea to go with an experience “zang” hunter for the first few times, because there are a number of similar looking plants that might confuse the first-time hunter. Tammy dug a small ginseng plant and gave it to me so I could correctly identify it when I saw it. She also recommended that I carry a long-handled screwdriver to dig with and a pouch or backpack to carry the roots in if I should find some. The screwdriver is very helpful in loosening the soil and for prying up rocks around the long, tuberous roots.

If you are up for a challenge and want to spend a delightful day in the great outdoors, digging ginseng may be just the ticket. Get a book on native plants to help you identify the elusive perennial, pack a lunch and some water, and be on your way!