

SPECIALTY CROP PROFILE: GINSENG

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For those familiar with ginseng they know it as a tender perennial native of the Appalachian region. As a wild plant it has been sought after and dug since the times of Daniel Boone, who reportedly was into the export business of this profitable root which still enjoys great demand as a medicinal herb in Asian markets. Since those early times, native ginseng populations have steadily dwindled due to over-harvesting. Wild ginseng hunting is still done, but is now regulated in this state by the Virginia Department of Agriculture.

As a specialty crop, adaptation of ginseng as a cultivated crop occurs in corporate farming settings to very small-scale woodlot plantings. Here in Virginia, our alternative crops expert, Andy Hankins of VSU, has worked tirelessly over the years to promote ginseng as an alternative crop for owners of shaded, wooded property. He has written a VCE Extension publication on a sustainable method of ginseng production, known as "wild-simulated", which could best be described as an "assisted" natural planting. He believes, as do I, that ginseng grown in this method holds great promise as an alternative forest product income. This publication "Producing and Marketing Wild Simulated Ginseng in Forest and Agroforestry Systems" can be accessed at: <http://pubs.ext.vt.edu/354-312/354-312>. All the details you need to make the enterprise a go are outlined by Andy, who shares his years of experience with this crop.

Culture of ginseng has evolved into large commercial operations with the crop growing on raised beds under artificial shade, with every horticultural technology thrown at it. However ginseng is a crop that responds to its environment and the resulting root quality, though big and healthy, actually brings a lower market price as compared to a wild root. Where a nice carrot-like cultured root may bring \$15-30.00 (or less) per pound dried; its wild, gnarled counterpart will bring \$400-600.00/lb., and under strong market demand. This is the reason that wild ginseng hunting is so profitable, and why it is becoming increasingly hard to find in the wild.

The good news is that by using the wild-simulated method, a root of native market quality can be produced; and, as compared to many other crops, it can be done with a minimum of cost and labor input. For those seeking to put idle timber acreage to good use, this system of ginseng growing makes sense and represents a significant potential income opportunity. The major disadvantage is the time to maturity (7-8 years), which is nearly twice that of a cultivated stand. With a crop of this level of value, loss by theft is also a reality to contend with, especially in isolated areas, and the long-term nature tends to increase that risk. However, as a crop, one should not look at it as a one-time effort, but continually plant on an annual basis to insure regular harvests after reaching year 7; and there are ways to decrease and respond to the risk of theft. From a nature preservation standpoint, widespread ginseng cultivation in our forested areas is a good thing, and in the long run, it may help to alleviate pressure and preserve our wild stand heritage.

Here at Virginia Tech, we have been working with Andy to fine-tune the wild-simulated method through modification of native soil nutrient levels by adding calcium, phosphorus and potassium. These nutrients are not tilled in, but surface broadcast, as the wild simulated system involves only minor soil disturbance, raking away the leaves, scratching the surface, and covering the seed. Initial field work in other states has indicated a correlation of wild stand locations and better seedling survival and plant vigor with increased soil calcium, a nutrient, along with phosphorus, that is often on the "low side" in many of our native soils.

For the past two years we have made experimental plantings, and will be following plant survival and growth. So far I have been impressed with the ease of good stand establishment in our setting with this method, and it has been a most interesting project to implement. In addition, Andy has been involved with numerous property owners around the state assisting in site selection and planting implementation in recent years. It is estimated that there are around 300 ginseng growers now in the state. It is hoped that through our research and Andy's continued promotional efforts, we can bring greater attention to the potential of this specialty crop to Virginia landowners as a way to put their timber and woodlands to a very sustainable and profitable use.

If you are interested in learning more about growing wild-simulated ginseng I would encourage you to download the publication from the above listed website or contact your local county agent, who can obtain a printed copy for you.

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