

NEW REGULATION OF WILD AMERICAN GINSENG HARVEST AND SALE

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In August of 2005, the Fish and Wildlife Service of the United States Department of the Interior enacted a new regulation that affects persons who dig wild ginseng roots and for persons who buy wild ginseng roots in Virginia. The new law requires wild roots of American ginseng, *Panax quinquefolius*, to be 10 years of age or older to be exported from Virginia. To be certified for sale there must be 9 or more bud-scale scars on the neck of the rhizome. This new regulation applies to nineteen states in the Mid-Atlantic and the North Central regions of the United States.

Interested persons read this regulation on the Internet at the following url:

<http://www.fws.gov/international/pdf/2005ginsengfinding.pdf>

Digging ginseng has been a pleasant and profitable pastime for many generations throughout the entire Appalachian Chain from Maine to Georgia. However there are reports that this law is already causing a great deal of disruption in the trade of wild harvested ginseng roots. Although wild ginseng plants are scarce in certain regions due to over-harvest and loss of habitat, in other regions there are healthy, thriving populations. Ginseng diggers who live in those areas where wild ginseng plants are plentiful are understandably angry about this new law. Selling dried ginseng roots has been a reliable source of supplemental income for many people in the mountain regions of Virginia. This activity, which is especially prevalent in Southwest Virginia, creates about \$1.2 million in annual income, through sales of approximately 4000 lbs. of root each year. With the new regulation, this amount of harvest and sales is anticipated fall by at least fifty percent.

The U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service regulation advises everyone to "dig mature four leaf ginseng plants" to assure that the roots are at least 10 years old. However, throughout much of ginseng's range, 4 leafed plants are extremely rare regardless of their age. Only plants growing on very good sites routinely produce 4 leafed plants and often they do so before age 10. All knowledgeable ginseng researchers are aware of this fact, as well as dealers and diggers all across the range of ginseng.



All of the very old wild ginseng roots in this photograph were two prong plants. This forest was decimated by forest tent caterpillars two years ago and again last year which caused the ginseng to senesce early (it gets sunburned). The result of this is small tops on big, old roots. Photo courtesy of Bob Beyfuss - Cornell Cooperative Extension.

The new Fish and Wildlife Service regulation states "Please, be advised that, based on our analysis of available information, we find that the export of wild American ginseng roots from plants 10 years of age (4-leafed) or older (i.e., with 10 or more bud-scale scars on the rhizome) harvested during the 2005 season in the following States will not be detrimental to the survival of the species: Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kentucky, Maryland, Minnesota, Missouri, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Vermont, Virginia, West Virginia, and Wisconsin."



These two prong ginseng plants are about 25 years old. Although ginseng plants tend to get larger as they grow older, there is no assurance that 4 leafed plants are at least 10 years old or that 2 or 3 leafed plants are less than 10 years old. Photo courtesy of Bob Beyfuss - Cornell Cooperative Extension.

Another statement in the new Fish and Wildlife Service regulation is: "The export of wild-simulated and woods-grown ginseng that is younger than 10 years of age, which is treated as wild for CITES export purposes, may be authorized on a case-by-case basis if applicants are able to document the origin their roots (including source of seed or transplants)." This language has created a fortunate loophole in a very unfortunate regulation, which results in persons who plant purchased seed or roots to create a naturalized stand of American ginseng on privately owned land, are not being subject to the U. S. Fish and Wildlife regulations.

Thus privately-owned and grown ginseng may be harvested at any age and sold to buyers anywhere, without any kind of permits or certification, provided the grower can prove they cultivated it. Growers just have to keep receipts that prove that they purchased the seed or transplants, and they should keep records showing the planting dates and harvest dates. Forest landowners who might like to try growing ginseng are directed to Virginia Cooperative Extension Publication 354-312 Producing and Marketing Wild Simulated Ginseng in Forest and Agroforestry Systems by Andy Hankins. This publication can be read on the Internet at the following url: <http://www.ext.vt.edu/pubs/forestry/354-312/354-312.html>

This new law enacted by the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service will certainly reduce the available supply of wild ginseng roots that international buyers and domestic buyers can purchase this fall and for many years to come. No one knows for sure but several industry leaders are predicting that prices paid for wild ginseng roots will rise. Persons in a secure location, who own forested land, may want to take advantage of this new law by buying and planting ginseng seeds in November of 2005.

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