

# Saving 'sang': New label aims to conserve wild ginseng

October 19 2015, by Michael Rubinkam

---

Denny Colwell fires up a weed whacker and makes quick work of his prized American ginseng patch, a fall ritual that helps hide the slow-growing, long-lived perennials from poachers keen on digging them up.

Colwell has been planting, growing and harvesting ginseng in the forests of western Pennsylvania for four decades, producing a root that's virtually indistinguishable from, and every bit as valuable as, its wild counterpart.

That makes him a juicy target for thieves. But it also means he's helping to conserve a plant deeply rooted in American history and commerce.

As wild populations continue to be thinned out by poaching, habitat loss and an overabundance of deer, backers of a new labeling program are encouraging landowners like Colwell to cultivate ginseng where it grows natively—on shady hillsides in the eastern U.S.—and to get it certified as "forest grown."

Their goal is to take some of the pressure off a coveted botanical that retails for hundreds or even thousands of dollars per pound in Asia, where very old, distinctive wild roots are often given as gifts and put on display, and less expensive roots are widely used as a tonic in traditional medicine. Diggers of wild American ginseng received more than \$60 million for their roots in 2013, according to the American Herbal Products Association.

"What we're trying to get some momentum around is this whole idea of growing ginseng to conserve it—conservation through cultivation," said Eric Burkhart, a Penn State University ginseng expert involved in the program.

The effort got a boost last month when the U.S. Department of Agriculture awarded a coalition of agricultural extension, conservation and other groups and academic researchers, including Burkhart, a grant of about \$650,000 to support beginning and existing forest farmers of ginseng—often colloquially called "sang"—and other medicinal plants in the Appalachian region.

American ginseng, which has been harvested commercially for 300 years, has been protected by an international treaty on endangered plants and animals since 1975. But there's evidence that wild populations are still under stress, given high demand in China, where most wild and forest-grown American ginseng winds up (along with a field-propagated variety grown under artificial shade).

Scientists have documented widespread decline in national parks—where harvesting is illegal—and in national forests in the species' core range in southern Appalachia. Other evidence of the species' relative scarcity includes a decrease in exports, from 141,000 pounds of wild ginseng in 1992 to 81,446 pounds in 2014.

Colwell, a third-generation grower, blames indiscriminate diggers of wild ginseng.

"A lot of guys don't go out and just dig one or two older roots. When they see it, they dig it all. Doesn't matter whether it's young, old or indifferent, they just dig it all and wipe it out because they don't care about anything but the dollar," he said.

Enter the forest-grown [verification program](#). Run by Pennsylvania Certified Organic, a body that certifies organic operations in nine states for the agriculture department, it has enrolled eight forest growers so far, with five others in the pipeline.

Proponents see the new labeling program as not only a means of conservation, but also as a marketing tool. The bet is that U.S. consumers of medicinal plants will be willing to pay a premium for a certified product, just as consumers have been willing to pay more for organic vegetables. Mountain Rose Herbs, a botanicals retailer in Eugene, Oregon, is an early adopter, selling certified forest-grown ginseng for \$38.50 per 6-gram tin.

"Many people are reluctant to use American ginseng because they know the plant is so endangered, and they don't know of a source they can buy from that is sustainable and ethical," said Susan Leopold of United Plant Savers, a conservation group and backer of the labeling program. "One hope is that this forest-grown verification program is going to develop more of a domestic use of these plants."

An expanded domestic market would give forest growers an alternative to Asia, where wholesale prices for wild-simulated ginseng fluctuate wildly and have plunged this year. Burkhart said forest growers are largely at the mercy of exporters who control prices.

"All I want is half price of what they retail it for," said Randy Yenzi, a veteran grower in western Pennsylvania who has enrolled in the verification program. "They won't go with it. And I think that would be a fair price for everybody. I'm lucky to get a third."

No matter whom they're selling it to, forest growers do not make a quick buck. Ginseng matures slowly, and must be at least 5 years old before it can be harvested. Many experienced growers wait 10 or more years,

because bigger, older roots fetch higher prices.

But a lot can happen to the plants in the meantime, including damage from deer and rodents.

Colwell worries most about theft. During harvest time, he often gets up in the middle of the night to check on his ginseng, taking a gun for protection in case he catches a poacher in the act. Hidden cameras stream images to his computer in real time, with one hooded figure in particular popping up several times during the 2013 harvest. He estimates he has lost at least \$100,000 worth of roots and seeds over the past five years.

"It's a major impediment for anybody that wants to get into the program," said Colwell, whose crop bears the forest-grown label.

The verification program could give growers a way to document the value of their ginseng in case of theft, said Burkhart, as well as an outlet for continued sales in Asia if the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service ever bans exports of wild [ginseng](#). Canada already prohibits exports.

Pennsylvania Certified Organic, meanwhile, hopes to expand the labeling program to other widely used native botanicals like goldenseal and black cohosh.

"I see a real potential market opportunity for something equivalent to the organic label," said Adam Seitz, a certification specialist with the group.

© 2015 The Associated Press. All rights reserved.

Citation: Saving 'sang': New label aims to conserve wild ginseng (2015, October 19) retrieved 17 July 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2015-10-sang-aims-wild-ginseng.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.