

AMERICAN GINSENG

Panax quinquefolius L.

Plant Symbol = PAQU

Contributed by: USDA NRCS National Plant Data Center



from Voss (1985)

Alternate Names

wild ginseng, sang

Uses

Ethnobotanic: American ginseng was used by Menominee hunters, who chewed the root to impart a lure to the breath and to attract deer. The plant was used by Meskwaki women to obtain a husband. A mixture consisted of ground ginseng, mica, gelatin, and snake meat. The Pawnee also used ginseng roots in combination with certain other substances as a love charm. The Ojibwe considered the root a good-luck charm if carried in the pocket. Huron Smith

(1932) recorded a potentially sustainable way to harvest the roots among the Ojibwe. "They only gathered the root when the red berries were mature, but before they were ready to drop. Into the hole from whence the root came, they would thrust the whole fruiting top, and carefully firm the soil upon it. Knowing the location well, they would revisit the place in three to five years and find more roots than they harvested in the first instance." The roots were used in eyewash by the Iroquois to treat the sore eyes of two-year-old children. The root could also be steeped in warm water and drunk for alleviating sores on the body. The pulverized root was smoked to treat asthma. Women of the Penobscot tribe took an infusion of the root to increase fertility. The Delaware used the roots and other plant parts as a general tonic. American ginseng is in high demand in the United States and China as an herbal remedy. It is used for stress and to increase energy and mental acuity in the United States. In China, it is a panacea for sexual impotency, nervousness, vomiting, and dyspepsia.

Status

In general, this species has been depleted by over-collecting for commercial purposes. Many states, such as Maryland, have a permit process instituted for collectors in the wild. Certain U.S. ports have been designated by the USDA, APHIS as ports through which ginseng can be exported. The Canadian Museum of Nature (2000) considers it a species at risk. Please consult the PLANTS web site and your State Department of Natural Resources for this plant's current status.

Description

General: Ginseng Family (Araliaceae). This aromatic herbaceous perennial has once palmately compound leaves arranged in a single whorl. The leaves are oblong-obovate to obovate, 6-15 cm, and conspicuously serrate. The stems are solitary, 2-6 dm, and with one flower umbel per stem. The flowers are greenish-white, all or mostly perfect. There are two styles and five stamens. The fruits are berry-like, bright red drupes, 1 cm thick.

Distribution

For current distribution, please consult the Plant Profile page for this species on the PLANTS Web site. This plant is now considered rare and collection in the wild is either prohibited or strictly regulated in the states in which it is found. Most regulations

allow digging only in autumn, after ginseng seeds have dropped. It is found in rich woods from Quebec to Minnesota and South Dakota to Georgia and occurs in Louisiana and Oklahoma. It grows in full shade underneath deciduous hardwood species.

Establishment

Ginseng is widely cultivated in the U.S., Canada, and China. In natural conditions, the seed may take two or three years to germinate and the plant three to four years to produce seed. The root takes at least three to four years before it is ready to harvest (Sadler 1999). Detailed growing instructions are available from Michigan State University Extension (1996).

Propagation by seeds: Fruits should be collected when they are red, usually August or September. Seeds can be separated from the pulp and sown fresh in the fall in flats. If stored, they should be stored moist. If buying seed, soak it in a 10 percent bleach solution for 20 minutes and rinse before sowing to kill any fungus spores that may have come along with them. After a 3-fingered leaf emerges in the spring, transplant each of these in bunches of 3 to deep pots. They will be ready to plant outside the following fall. Plant the plants in full shade under deciduous trees in a well-drained soil and keep them moist. Wild American ginseng is typically found in calcium rich forest soils well supplied with organic matter.

Management

If American ginseng has been planted in an acid soil, apply dolomite every fall to heighten the plant's vigor and color. Hand weed around the plants.

Cultivars, Improved and Selected Materials (and area of origin)

This species is generally available from those nurseries that specialize in herbs. Contact your local Natural Resources Conservation Service (formerly Soil Conservation Service) office for more information. Look in the phone book under "United States Government." The Natural Resources Conservation Service will be listed under the subheading "Department of Agriculture."

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Prepared By

M. Kat Anderson & J. Scott Peterson
USDA, NRCS, National Plant Data Center

Species Coordinator

M. Kat Anderson
USDA, NRCS, National Plant Data Center
c/o Department of Environmental Horticulture,
University of California, Davis, California

Edited 05dec00 jsp; 29may03 ahv; 060802 jsp

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