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Ginseng: the official herb of Wisconsin

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Introduction

On November 30, 2017, Governor Scott Walker signed 2017 Wisconsin Act 86 into law, officially designating ginseng as the Wisconsin state herb.

What is ginseng?

American ginseng, or *Panax quinquefolius*, is a slow-growing perennial herb that is a member of the ivy family. Above ground, the ginseng plant has leaves that look similar to a strawberry plant and grows small red berries in the fall. The beige root of the plant, which resembles a parsnip, is used as herbal medicine, particularly in eastern Asia. Some claim that ginseng root raises energy levels, lowers cholesterol, enhances strength, and reduces stress. The most sought-after ginseng roots are those that are shaped like humans, with thick bodies and leg-like roots. The term ginseng is derived from the Chinese term *jen-shen*, which means “in the image of a man.” Dried ginseng root is chewed or taken in pill form and is used in teas and cooking. Due to a higher concentration of ginsenosides—the active compound within the root—American ginseng is generally more desirable than Asian ginseng. There is currently limited scientific research demonstrating ginseng’s effectiveness, but a promising 2012 study by Mayo Clinic found that ginseng boosted energy levels in patients with cancer-related fatigue.

History of the ginseng trade

Because of its higher levels of ginsenosides, wild ginseng is significantly more valuable than domesticated ginseng. Wild ginseng once thrived in the shady, deciduous forests of Wisconsin and in other eastern states. As early as the 1870s, Wisconsin farmers harvested and sold wild ginseng to supplement their incomes. However, over-harvesting throughout the United States led to wild ginseng being designated as an endangered species in the 1970s. Today, wild ginseng is rare, and its harvest is heavily restricted and regulated by federal and state laws. As a result, ginseng is primarily grown as a domesticated crop on farms under artificial shade designed to mimic forest.

Farmers have raised domesticated ginseng in Wisconsin for over a century. Beginning in 1904, in Hamburg, brothers Walter, Edward, John, and Henry Fromm pioneered ginseng farming in the state. After the Fromm brothers successfully harvested and sold their first crop for \$24 in 1909, several farmers in the area began to replicate their farming process. For the next two decades, demand for American ginseng, particularly in China, steadily grew. By 1919, Wisconsin became the leading state in the nation in the production of ginseng. In the middle of the twentieth century, the ginseng trade was disrupted, first owing to the Japanese invasion and occupation of China and

later as a result of the U.S. embargo on trade with China during the rise of the Communist State. Once the United States normalized trade with China, the Wisconsin ginseng trade thrived between the 1960s and mid-1990s. By 1992, U.S. ginseng exports reached \$104 million. However, the price of ginseng plummeted between 1996 and 2005, due to a decline in world market prices and an increase in the worldwide production of ginseng. In recent years, Wisconsin ginseng production has bounced back, although the price per pound has fluctuated significantly from year to year. In 2013, Wisconsin ginseng sold for \$80 per pound; today it sells for about \$35 per pound.

Growing ginseng

Growing ginseng is labor-intensive and expensive because it requires much care and attention. Farmers typically grow ginseng on a small plot of around ten acres of land; one acre will typically yield about 2,000 pounds of ginseng root. Ginseng takes four to five years to grow from seed to harvest and can be grown only once on a plot of land. Growing ginseng requires expensive, specialized equipment that often must be custom-built, such as the suspended structures of black mesh or wood lattice used to create artificial shade. The crop also requires weekly sprayings to prevent disease and fungus and other measures to protect against unseasonable frosts and wild turkeys scratching for insects.

Ginseng is harvested in October. Once harvested, the root is typically refrigerated for 10 to 20 days to alter the sugars and starches to give it a better texture. Next, the roots are washed and then dried for two weeks in specially designed kilns. Once dried, the roots are packaged into boxes or sealed barrels in which they can be immediately shipped or kept for years.

Wisconsin ginseng

In the United States, Wisconsin remains the leading producer of ginseng in both acreage and volume, and the state is known for producing some of the highest quality ginseng in the world. It is estimated that Wisconsin farmers together, on roughly 500 acres, produced over one million pounds of ginseng in 2017, which accounted for 98 percent of U.S. ginseng production and 10 percent of the world's supply.

The vast majority of Wisconsin's ginseng production takes place in north-central Wisconsin, particularly in Marathon County. Ginseng growers in the region attribute their success to the area's cool climate, rolling hills, and quality topsoil, which is well-drained yet rich. In September 2017, Wausau hosted the first annual International Wisconsin Ginseng Festival to celebrate the region's significant role in the ginseng trade. The festival highlighted the historical, culinary, and agricultural aspects of Wisconsin ginseng. The 2018 festival will be held September 14–16.

In Wisconsin, the Ginseng Board of Wisconsin, a nonprofit organization established in 1986, represents roughly 190 registered ginseng growers. The GBW works to expand domestic and international markets for Wisconsin ginseng. In July 2017, the GBW signed a memorandum of understanding with Foxconn, the Taiwan-based manufacturer that is building a display screen factory in Racine County. The MOU states that, for the next year, the two organizations will investigate working together to promote Wisconsin ginseng in Asia.

Further reading

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Ginseng Board of Wisconsin: <http://www.ginsengboard.com/>.

International Ginseng Festival: <https://www.visitwausau.com/traveltools/wisconsin Ginseng Festival>.