

# **VIRGINIA GINSENG MANAGEMENT PROGRAM**

## **WHAT IS GINSENG AND HOW IS IT USED**

American ginseng is a perennial herbaceous herbal plant that is native to the eastern half of the United States and Canada. Parts of the ginseng plant are exported or sold domestically and processed for consumption or as additives to food and cosmetic products. Products from the ginseng plant are believed to be a cure for many ills and have strength building qualities. Ginseng root is believed to have special medicinal properties. Leaves from the plant are used as a tea and in other consumable products. The greatest markets for ginseng are over-seas. Much of the wild ginseng harvested in North America is exported to Asia for processing and resale. However, there is a growing domestic market for ginseng products.

## **WHY IS WILD GINSENG A THREATENED SPECIES**

The status of the plant varies greatly from area to area. In Virginia, wild ginseng is included in the Endangered Plant and Insect Species Act as a threatened species. Because of a long history of exploitation it has never had a chance to become abundant and many people believe the abundance of wild ginseng has diminished in certain areas. In areas where collectors have been especially active for a long time, supplies have diminished slowly to the point where the plant is becoming hard to find.

In 1973 the United States and other countries that collaborated in developing the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) agreed to certain restrictions on the international trade of wild and artificially propagated American ginseng. American ginseng must be accompanied by appropriate federal permits when exported. Export requirements for ginseng are established by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and monitored at designated ports by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. A list of requirements and permits for the export of ginseng products and other species may be obtained by contacting the USFWS International Affairs Office or from their website at <http://www.fws.gov/international/plants/>.

## **HOW TO COLLECT WILD GINSENG**

If the ginseng industry is to survive in Virginia, collectors and dealers must share certain responsibilities. If they do not, supplies of the plant could become severely depleted and the business significantly diminished. Laws and regulations for the harvest, transport, and sale of ginseng have been adopted to protect the wild population of ginseng and commercial trade in the plant products.

Harvest only after the berries have turned red. The harvest season in Virginia begins on September 1<sup>st</sup> of each year. Ginseng plants may not be harvested prior to September 1<sup>st</sup> except from one's own land. Individuals are encouraged to delay harvest of wild ginseng root until after September 15<sup>th</sup> in order to allow berries to fully ripen. Digging roots when the seeds are green, or immature, may prevent germination needed for plant replacement.

Seeds from harvested plants must be planted at the site from which the plant is removed. The species is thus perpetuated in a habitat where it is established. It may take two years for the seed to germinate and the plant may not flower and set seed for another four to five years.

It is critical that only mature plants be harvested to ensure their replacement and long-term survival. Ginseng plants typically start producing seeds when plants are 3 to 4 years of age. Only mature plants that are 5 years of age or older with three or more leaves, called "prongs", and four or more bud scars present on the rhizome may be harvested. Most ginseng plants produce three prongs between 5 and 9 years of age. The age of a ginseng plant can also be determined by counting the bud scars on the root. A single bud scar is produced every autumn after the plant's stem falls. To determine a plant's age after leaf drop begins simply remove the topmost soil around the area where the plant's stem joins the root to count the bud scale scars.

To remove the ginseng roots, dig up a clump of soil around the plant about one foot in diameter. Gently remove loose soil, taking care not to break off the "tail" roots. Undamaged, whole roots bring the highest prices. Brush off loose soil, allow the roots to wilt for several days, gently wash off the remaining soil, and slowly air dry them until ready to sell. After digging the roots, squeeze the red berries to break the pulp; plant the seeds twelve (12) or more inches apart and one half (1/2) inch deep in loosely mulched soil at the same site. Cover the area with leaf litter; examine the population occasionally to remove major weeds, but otherwise leave the area undisturbed.

USFWS issues findings through the Divisions of Scientific Authority and Management Authority to prevent the detrimental harvest of ginseng roots. Ginseng that does not meet export requirements established by USFWS will be unmarketable. Harvesters and dealers should consult with the Office of Plant Industry Services in the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (VDACS) or USFWS Division of Scientific Authority to determine the current year's export requirements. USFWS determinations for annual harvest of wild ginseng are available on their website at <http://www.fws.gov/international/plants/american-ginseng.html>.

## **WHEN MAY WILD GINSENG ROOT BE COLLECTED**

In Virginia, the collecting season begins September 1<sup>st</sup> and ends December 31<sup>st</sup> of each calendar year, except when wild ginseng is dug from one's own land. A landowner-seller declaration form and certification must be completed when wild ginseng is dug from one's own land and sold prior to September 1<sup>st</sup> for green wild ginseng and September 15<sup>th</sup> for dried wild ginseng. Individuals are encouraged to delay harvest of wild ginseng root until after September 15<sup>th</sup> to protect wild ginseng from over-harvest until its seeds have ripened and dispersed, helping to guarantee the establishment of new plants in the wild. It is illegal to harvest wild ginseng, except from one's own land, between January 1<sup>st</sup> and August 31<sup>st</sup> of each calendar year. Ginseng must be inspected and certified by a VDACS inspector if the amount being transported or otherwise removed from the state by an individual in a calendar year exceeds eight (8) ounces.

## **WHO MAY DIG WILD GINSENG AND WHERE CAN GINSENG BE COLLECTED**

You may dig the plant on your own land. Individuals intending to harvest from another's property must obtain permission from the landowner before removing any ginseng plants. Permission should be in writing and carried with you while searching for or digging the plant. If you dig on another person's land without his or her permission you are committing a crime that is punishable by fine, imprisonment, or both. Removal of plants and other natural resources from state and federal lands is prohibited unless you have obtained written permission beforehand. Individuals should contact the appropriate local, state, or federal authority responsible for management of the public lands to determine if ginseng harvesting is permissible and what permits are required.

Collecting ginseng or any portion of the plant, including the berries, from the Jefferson National Forest for personal or commercial use is prohibited. Removing ginseng from the national forest comes with strict penalties, including a fine of up to \$5,000, six months in jail, or both.

Harvest of ginseng from a state park, natural area, or natural area preserve for personal or commercial use is prohibited. Persons found removing ginseng from these lands may be subject to fine, jail, or both.

## **WHO MAY BUY WILD GINSENG**

Anyone may obtain, and export from the state, up to 8 ounces of ginseng in a calendar year for personal or individual use. Persons transporting more than 8 ounces of ginseng from the state in a calendar year must first obtain an inspection certificate before doing so. Individuals or companies purchasing ginseng in Virginia for the purpose of reselling the product, including as part of another product or food, must obtain a license to do so from VDACS. The licensing period is from January 1<sup>st</sup> through December 31<sup>st</sup> of each year. A licensed dealer may purchase certified wild ginseng at any time throughout the year. However, a dealer may only purchase uncertified green wild ginseng root from September 1<sup>st</sup> of each year through January 14<sup>th</sup> of the following year and uncertified dry wild ginseng root from September 15<sup>th</sup> of each year through March 31<sup>st</sup> of the following year. Records for transactions from the purchase or sale of ginseng must be reported to VDACS.

## **FOR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION CONTACT**

**Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services  
Office of Plant Industry Services  
Endangered Species Coordinator  
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