



Ginseng, the Divine Root Fact Sheet

The story behind ginseng is as remarkable as the root itself. Prized for its legendary curative powers, ginseng launched China's last great dynasty, sparked booms and busts across rural America, and inspired a subculture unrivaled by any herb in the plant kingdom.

Today ginseng is at the center of alternative medicine, and is being studied for its effects on everything from the immune system to cancer, diabetes, and Parkinson's disease.

In *Ginseng, the Divine Root*, David Taylor tracks this fascinating plant from the forests of North America to the bustling markets of Hong Kong and deep into China. He takes readers into a hidden world of dealers, diggers, and poachers, all with a common goal: to hunt down the elusive "Root of Life."

An Underground History

- Ginseng is among the world's oldest plants, predating continental drift. It's native to both Asia and North America.
- Marco Polo returned to Europe with stories of how ginseng was treasured and used by Asian rulers.
- Ginseng sales spurred the rise of the last Chinese dynasty. As one historian wrote, "The Qing dynasty rose on ginseng and fell on opium."
- According to legend, ginseng could transform itself into a bird, a person, or even a tiger to escape hunters. Chinese diggers prepared themselves with elaborate rituals.
- The first ship to sail under the American flag to China carried a cargo of ginseng, the first major U.S. export to the Far East.
- Daniel Boone dug ginseng and sent it to Philadelphia for export.
- The plant helped build the fortune of John Jacob Astor.
- In Minnesota in the 1860s, ginseng's discovery sparked a boom comparable to the Gold Rush.

A Global Market

- Ginseng is called the "king of herbal medicine."
- It is often claimed as an ingredient in energy drinks, now a \$27-billion industry.
- The most expensive single wild ginseng plant on record was marketed in Shanghai in 2004 for \$268,440. The root was over five feet long and more than 1,000 years old.
- In China and Korea, ginseng farming is a huge business. In the U.S., most ginseng farms are concentrated in central Wisconsin.
- Wild American ginseng roots typically travel 8,700 miles from forests to markets in Asia.
- In the 1990s the U.S. exported around \$100 million in ginseng every year. In recent years, Canada has been a main rival.
- The Hong Kong phone directory lists 286 ginseng retailers.
- An estimated half of American ginseng imports to China is smuggled to avoid import tariffs.
- In Seoul's Incheon Airport, two dogs have been trained solely to sniff out illegal ginseng.

A Medical Controversy

- Asian medicine has used ginseng for centuries to treat insomnia, fatigue, and digestive problems.
- Recent studies suggest ginseng may slow brain-cell loss and boost the immune system. Researchers are studying the plant for treatments of diabetes, Parkinson's, and other conditions.
- In late imperial China, ginseng's reputation grew out of hand. It was even reputed to bring back the dead.
- American ginseng and Asian ginseng differ in the proportion of active compounds. Asian ginseng is known as a "warming" herb, which can boost energy; American ginseng is a "cooling" herb that reduces stress.
- A single ginseng plant can grow to over 100 years old. For medicinal use, the plant takes five years to mature.
- The plant known as "Siberian ginseng" (*Eleuthera*) is not actually a ginseng at all.

David Taylor explores revealing connections between people and their worlds. His award-winning articles have appeared in *Smithsonian*, *The Washington Post*, *The Village Voice*, *Outside*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, and other publications. He has written documentaries for PBS, National Geographic, and the Discovery Channel. For more information, visit www.divineroot.com.