

Update on Export Regulations for Ginseng

By Elise George and Chip Carroll

American Ginseng, one of the world's most valued plants, was first exported from the United States in the mid-1700s. In August 2005, the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) revised export regulations for this CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species) listed species. Typically, CITES listed species are those which have been traditionally harvested and traded internationally but have been determined to need oversight and monitoring to ensure long-term health of the species. In North America, the USFWS is the agency mandated to oversee CITES. According to the revised regulations, wild ginseng exported from the U.S. must now be 10 years of age, having 9 bud-scale scars on the neck of the rhizome. Wild-simulated and woodsgrown ginseng exported from the U.S. must be 5 years of age or older, with 4 bud-scale scars on the neck of the root and have documentation that it was planted, grown and harvested as an agricultural product. This is a change from the 1999 USFWS ruling, which required all ginseng exported to be at least 5 years of age.

While in some ways this can be seen as a positive step toward the conservation of the species, there are many other factors involved. The current decision-making process has not allowed for public input, making it difficult for dealers, growers, harvesters and others to plan for the future of their enterprises, which can and in many cases do promote the survival of this valuable species. Many states weren't able to change their local laws to reflect the new ruling by USFWS because of the short notice given that the change was coming. Ohio is one example of this. Ohio's laws still reflect the 1999 ruling, requiring that plants *harvested or exported* be at least 5 years of age. This means that while it is still legal in Ohio to harvest plants that are older than 5 and younger than 10 years old, this root will not be able to be exported out of the US into the traditional ginseng markets in Asia. This difference between state and federal laws has created a situation where ginseng buyers are hesitant to buy ginseng for fear of not being able to export it, while wild harvesters and growers were, for the most part, uninformed of these changes and continued to harvest plants younger than 10.

While it is yet unforeseen, the market for wild-simulated and woodsgrown ginseng may rise due to a reduction in wild collection, as the price may fall since growers now have to distinguish their product from "wild" ginseng (which is preferred by Asian cultures, the largest market audience for American Ginseng.) The future of the grower industry is important as growing medicinal herbs takes pressure off of wild populations.

Harvesters will be at least temporarily harmed by this effort to promote American Ginseng's recovery, as few wild populations contain plants of 10 years of age or older. One can hope, however, that the long-term sustainability of this cultural tradition will be supported in the future by a repopulation of American ginseng throughout its range by the dedicated ginseng stewards who will continue to grow and responsibly harvest and propagate this world renowned plant.

Rural Action is currently working with the Roots of Appalachia Growers Association (RAGA) and other regional growers groups, harvesters, researchers and other interested parties to try to find solutions to address concerns that growers & harvesters have about these new policies and the processes that drive them. If you would like to become involved or have any questions about this work, please contact Chip Carroll or Elise George at 740-742-4401.

