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Focus



Ginseng: crop grown for export

TEXT and PHOTOS
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Staff reporter

Ginseng — mysterious herb of the mysterious East — is an important but little publicized product of Marathon County.

Although the county grows more ginseng than any other locality (about 80 per cent of the nation's supply), the average person knows little or nothing about it, and for a good reason — it's mostly shipped to the British Crown Colony of Hong Kong, China and Korea.

The word ginseng comes from Chinese words meaning "shaped like a man," and it is used in the Far East to treat

nearly every disease. The root is the salable part of the plant, and those roots which nature capriciously shapes like a man are worth their weight in gold to the Chinese. The herb supposedly has aphrodisiac powers.

For over 100 years Wisconsin has been a leading supplier of this wild root to the Chinese. There has never been a market for ginseng in the United States because medical opinion has doubted its value.

Health food fans, however, have only recently become interested in ginseng. This could open an American market to some extent,

although costs may discourage many buyers. It sells for \$3.50 an ounce in powdered form in most health food stores. A tea is also available for \$8.50 a packet.

The ginseng plant is about one foot tall and has five leaflets. It bears small greenish-yellow flowers and, later, scarlet berries. It is ultra-sensitive and cannot be replanted on the same land. It simply will not grow.

Ginseng growers must wait five years for a crop. It can be harvested in three years, but this yields small roots and is done only when blight or root

rot threatens to destroy the entire crop.

Recently the plant has come under intensive study by those dealing with pharmacognosy — the science related to the source, physical characteristics, uses and dosage of drugs.

Research is being funded by Fromm Brothers, Hamburg, world's ginseng growers. Particularly being investigated are two compounds found in the American ginseng root. Some of this material will be made available for screening in cancer research. Present value

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Growing the herb . . .

Several tractors slowly pull the ginseng harvester as it digs the roots from the soil. This scene is on the Fromm Brothers' acreage, largest in Marathon County devoted to this difficult - to - grow crop.



of these compounds for human use is not known.

Ginseng tea is said to have a bitter taste. The extract of the root tastes somewhat like soy sauce, although stronger. Some Orientals make their own extract by placing a two - inch piece of ginseng root in an alcoholic beverage, leaving it there for at least two weeks. They will drink a small wine-glass of the liquid every day.

Orientals have been using ginseng since about 3000 B.C. The plant has caused small wars in the Far East, has been used as a powerful trade instrument, and has even figured in ransom payments.

Marathon County growers in recent years have been selling their ginseng crop for from \$20 to \$28 per pound, dried.

Frank Volhard and his son, Donald, both of Marathon, are successful Marathon County growers who can remember tales of early ginseng growers. "They didn't know how to take care of the seed," according to Frank.

"The seed has no oil in its makeup," he said, hinting this could make it more vulnerable to damage. It will not grow the first year.

The elder Volhard said his father was known to dig some wild roots in the woods. It is said ginseng grows in all states east of the Mississippi River, except in the deep south.



Roots dug by the machinery pass through the hands of women who sort out superfluous material. Woman in

the foreground retrieves roots shunted aside by the digger.

But before anyone moves ahead with notions of acquiring an acre of land to grow ginseng it would be well to reflect on the difficulties which lie ahead.

The plants require a tremendous amount of care, including a forest - like environment and fresh breezes. To simulate the sun peeking through trees, lath arbors are constructed, which are expensive. Some weeding is done by hand.

Blight and root rot are constant enemies to be fought by the grower. It is not without possibility that a crop that is years in growing can be wiped out.

The seed itself is very difficult to obtain. Most producers have none for sale. Even if acquired, seed must be cured in moist sand for many months. There is no guarantee the seed will be any good in the first place. It is difficult to ship.

Successful ginseng growers must have plenty of land. Because the crop can never be

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NEXT WEEK:

The quality of Marathon County Historical Museum is evidenced in its accreditation by the American Association of Museums. Only 100 museums in the nation, and only four in Wisconsin, have the accreditation. Next week in FOCUS, reporter Geri Nikolai will tell of some of the work that goes into maintaining a quality museum, and talk about what you can do to be a curator of Marathon County's history.



These ginseng roots will travel to the other side of the world, where they will be eagerly

purchased by Orientals. They will be washed and dried before beginning their journey.

. . . takes land and time

grown again on the same acreage, costly new beds must be planted in another location. Experimentation by various methods — even sterilizing the ground with flame — does no good in coaxing the mysterious plant to grow again.

Wild ginseng, if it can be found, is worth more than domestic — roots may sell for \$40 per pound. It takes more than 50 plants to yield a pound. When a plant hunter finds a patch of ginseng he keeps it a secret. It invariably grows in secluded places, as if shying away from civilization. Some ginseng hunters claim the blossoms will close if any noise is made. It never grows near stagnant water. The wild root may take eight years to mature.

Cultivation of ginseng is big business in Korea, where its production is government controlled. At harvest time a government official stands by while the grower carefully uproots his mature plants.

The Soviet Union has experimented with ginseng, at one

time after World War II purchasing almost the entire Korean crop for \$120,000,000. But the greatest mystery

surrounding this little plant (which some say extracts radioactive substances from the ground) is that the modern

world knows so little about it — and Orientals have held it in high esteem for over 50 centuries!



Frank Volhard, Marathon, checks drying trays of ginseng

Volhard's father grew ginseng also, starting in 1905. Now Volhard and his son, Donald, grow the herb, falling back on the many years of experience. Ginseng

must dry about 12 days under proper conditions. The roots must be packed immediately at this stage, or they will again absorb moisture from the air.