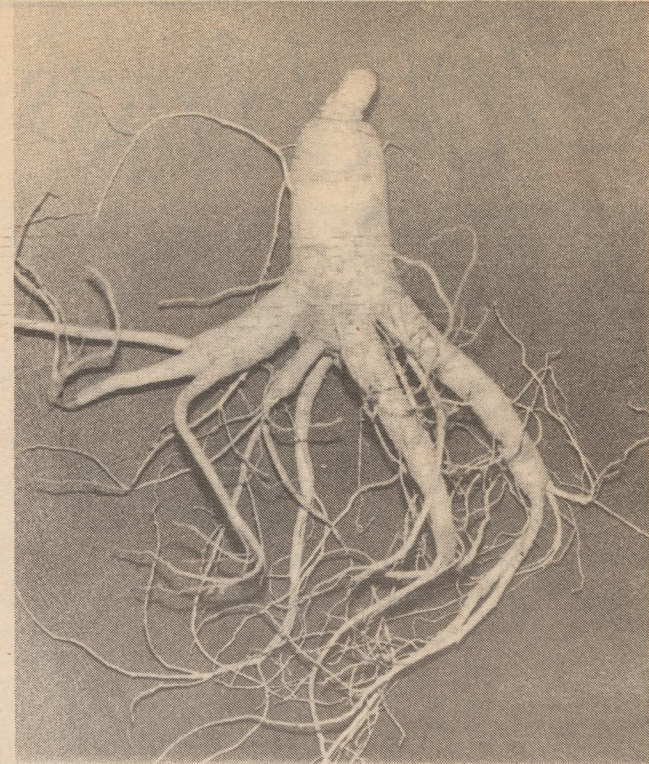




Nina Skic (left) and Mary Calmes pick ginseng roots from the fields after they are dug with a modified potato digger. . . . Foto News.



A closeup view of an "excellent" 3 year old ginseng root, according to ginseng grower, Bruce Calmes. . . . Foto News.

Ginseng growers' initial investments reap delayed profits

Ginseng growers do not expect overnight success, but rather several years of hard work and attention to the fields before receipts begin to exceed expenses. Several interested and dedicated ginseng growers have joined forces to keep expenses down. Working together in the joint effort are Marie Skic, Mark and Nina Skic, Walter and Kay Skic, Bruce and Mary Calmes and Walter and Greta Rusch. Skic Farms, Inc. has provided much of the land for the ginseng operation and Bruce Calmes has built and provides much of the equipment and machinery needed for the operation.

Before ginseng seed can even be planted, the land needs to be worked at least one year ahead of planting in order to eliminate the bugs and weeds. When the ground is finally ready to plant, it is plowed into beds, six feet wide and 8-10" high to allow for proper drainage and digging. The seed is then sowed on top of the bed. Calmes estimates that it takes about 130 lbs. of seed per acre of land. After seeding, a four inch layer of straw is needed to prevent weeds from growing and to keep the beds from eroding in heavy rains. Every fall, a straw layer needs to be applied, to prevent plants from freezing.

Planting ginseng seed is usually done in September. In early May, the roofs are put on. Wood lathes or fabric can be used to cover the plants which need 80% shade to grow well. Once the gardens are covered, it is critical to check fields periodically for pests and diseases throughout the whole summer. Calmes sprays his gardens every 7-10 days with state approved chemicals. In fall the coverings need to be removed again to avoid the heavy snow accumulation which can ruin the garden roofs.

In the third year, a clump of red berries is picked from the ginseng plant around the first of September. The berries are then placed in gunny sacks where they are left to rot. Then the berries are stepped on to separate the seed from the pulp. To separate the bad seed from the good, the sack full of berries is dumped into a tank of water. The good seed settles to the bottom, claims Calmes, and the bad seed and pulp float to the top. The good seed is then mixed with sand and set aside until the following fall for planting. Called stratified seed, it must go through two frosts before it begins to grow.

Each growing season of the ginseng plant is counted by the number of stems that are produced. Year one is one stem, year two is two stems, etc. After the berries are picked in the third or fourth year, the ginseng plant is ready for market. The plants are scraped off with the straw and are then dug out with a digger.

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Continuing a steady rhythm, Pat Gryskiewicz tosses wagonloads of ginseng into a rotating machine which gently washes the roots after picking. . . . Foto News.



As the roots tumble through the washing machine, they drop into a tub of water as Walter Skic loads the cleaned roots onto a truck to be taken to the drying sheds. . . . Foto News.



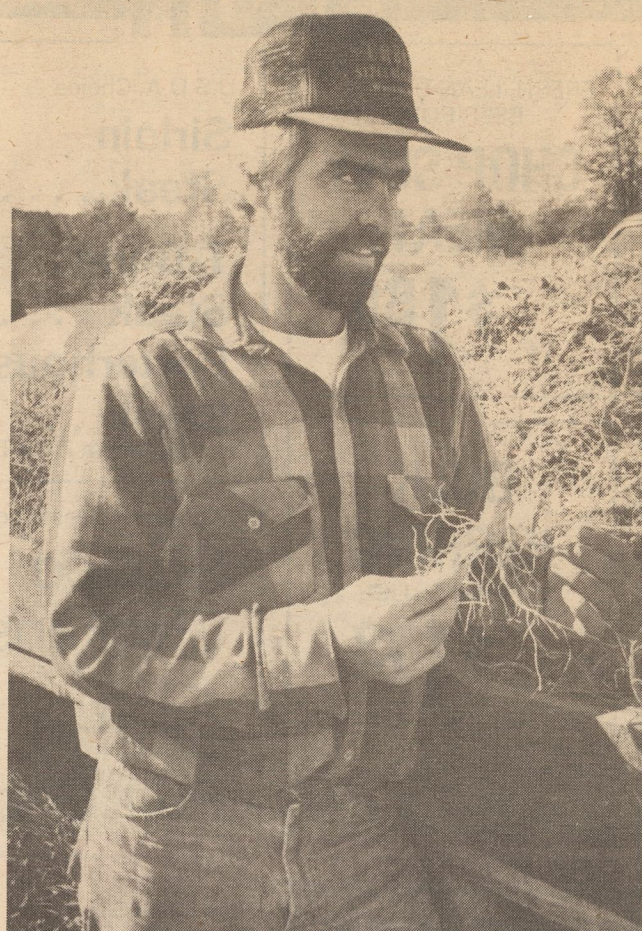
After the roots are washed, they are spread on stacked racks to dry by (left to right) Marilyn Luedtke, Wally Rusch and Bruce Calmes. . . . Foto News.



After the roots are dried they are packed into barrels for sale to dealers. Paul Hsu (left) of Hsu Ginseng Enterprises, Highway W, carefully examines Calmes' ginseng roots and is pleased with the quality Calmes offers him. Because of the light color of Calmes' roots, much of his crop will probably be shipped to Taiwan, which demands that type of quality root. . . . Foto News.

Ginseng growers

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Bruce Calmes, 13150 12th Avenue, Merrill, examines his 3 year roots. After years of investment and effort, the ginseng grower's efforts are beginning to show a profit. . . . Foto News.

The roots are then picked, washed and dried for about 10 days. About 2/3 of each root is water weight. After the roots are dried, they are placed in cardboard drums for sale. About one acre of ginseng gardens can produce about 2000 lbs. of dried root.

According to Calmes, "To get started in the business is expensive. For 3-4 years you are continuously investing money before you begin to see any kind of return on your investment." Every year is a gamble in the ginseng business. Barring disease and pests, however, a profit can be made when roots are good and the market demand is up. "This year," comments Calmes, "the market is better than the last few years."

Besides the investment of money, ginseng growers need to invest time. Calmes, who is a dedicated ginseng grower, offers a bit of expert advice to anyone interested in the venture. "For anyone who wants to give up bird hunting and weekends off --Plant Shang!"

FN