

Ginseng — The Chinese 'Cure-All' Root

Fromm Bros. of Hamburg Are Key Producers

By Floyd & Tuchscher, Marshfield N-Herald



"Smalley" inspects plants in an arbor. Notice how the slats in arbor cast shadows on "Smalley" and men below spraying of plants. The spraying prevents mildew and blight during summer.

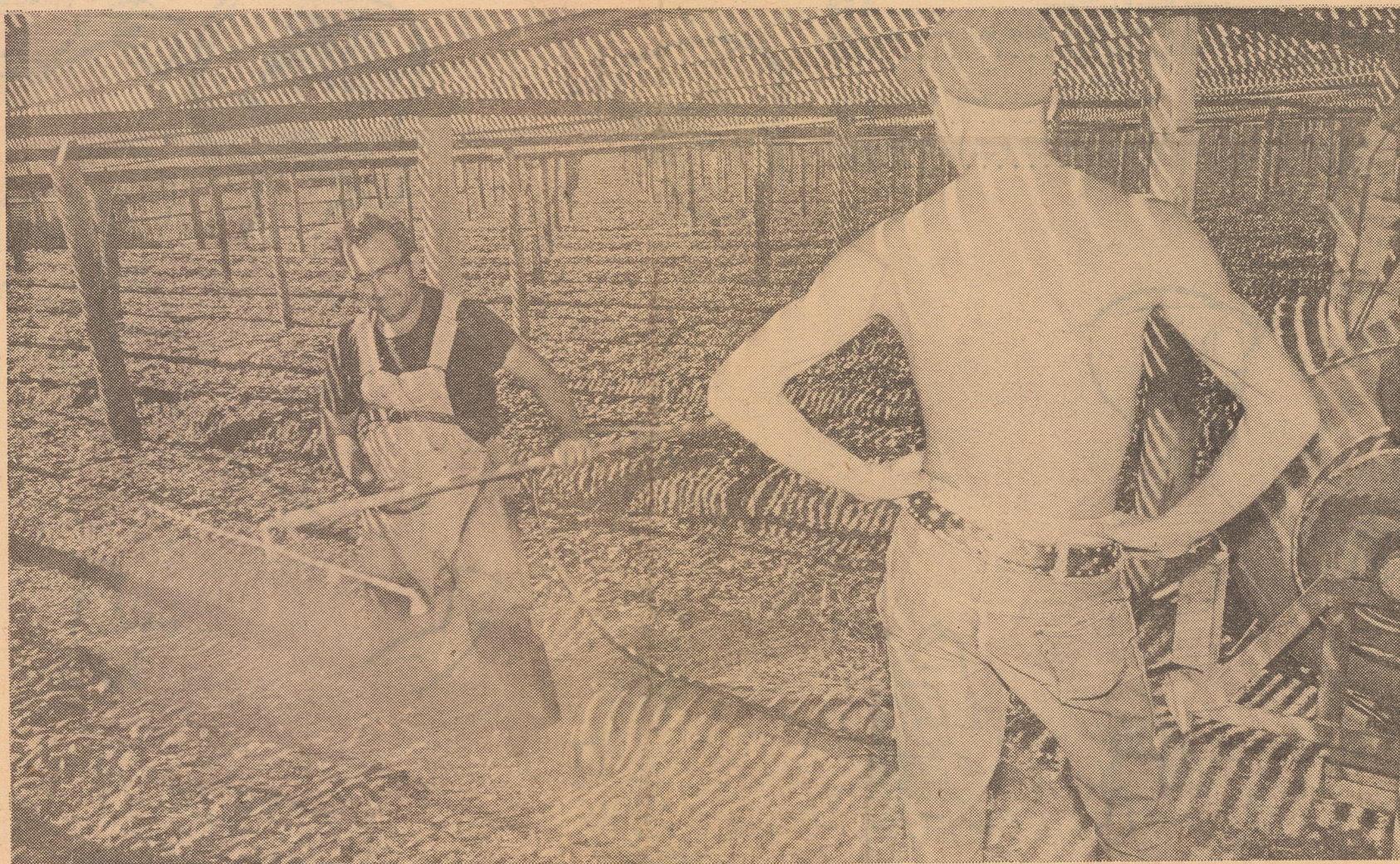
Photos by Tuchscher, News-Herald

On a Sunday afternoon 62 years ago, four Fromm brothers, Edward, Henry, John and Walter, and their father, strolled through a woods near the Fromm farmstead in Hamburg (Marathon County) township to examine the fall butternut crop.

Beneath a tree one of the brothers poked a plant with his toe. The plant had broad, bright green leaves and red berries. "What is it?" he asked.

"Ginseng", the father replied, and then he recalled how a neighbor claimed that Chinamen paid so much for it that he could make \$30,000 an acre. "He's even built a house of laths to grow it in, but it would have to be worth a lot more than that before I'd fuss with a crop that takes five years to grow," the elder Fromm added.

Dried Ginseng root from the North Central States in those days brought about \$6 a pound in oriental lands, principally China where the plant has been venerated for centuries and still is esteemed as being of great medical value. The plant is not employed in western medicine. China and other Asiatic countries still provide the only market for ginseng.



The Fromm boys knew practically nothing about ginseng, but if the forest plant could be cultivated they saw dazzling possibilities of tapping a natural resource to realize an even greater ambition to engage in fur farming.

Their original ginseng bed covered only a tiny patch of ground because the elder Fromm took a dim view of ginseng culture encroaching on a farm of orderly fields and traditional crops, but the ginseng from that plot of forest plants paid for the foundation stock of silver foxes at the Fromm ranch, that has developed into a multi-million-dollar business. How the Fromm's attained world leadership in fur raising is a story in itself, told in a book "Bright With Silver" authored by Katherine Pinkerton.

Today, the possibly 300 acres of ginseng in cultivation in the United States, Marathon County has an estimated 200 or more acres, and half of these are on the Fromm farm, making it the largest single producer of cultivated ginseng in the nation.

Ginseng, foxes, and mink have taken turns confronting the Fromm's with problems, but when one venture failed to pay its way, the other business within a business generally helped to take up the slack.

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Ginseng planting begins with seeds harvested from mature plants. Seeds are best planted in spring, as early as the soil can be worked to advantage. Only cracked or partially germinated seeds should be used. The seeds are covered one inch deep with woods soil or old rotten hickory or basswood sawdust.

Roots may be set out any time from October to April when the soil is in suitable condition, the crowns being placed about two inches below the surface. The most approved way to plant is six to eight inches apart each way.

Ginseng requires little cultivation, but grass and weeds should be kept out of the beds. Most of this type of work at Fromm's is done by women employees who are residents of the area. Photo by Radunz, Record-Herald.



Planting beds are well built up with centers high enough not to retain water after a rain. The paths or alleys between beds are lower than the beds, and as they incline from one end to the other they serve as surface drains during heavy rains. Beds are about four feet wide and preferably run east and west, being so placed that the drip falls to a great extent in the paths. A winter mulch over the crowns of plants is essential in northern localities.

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Ginseng seedlings grow about two inches high the first year, with three leaflets at the apex of the stem. The second-year plants may reach a height of five or six inches, to bear two compound leaves, each composed of five characteristic leaflets. A third leaf is generally added the next year, when plants begin to produce berries. In succeeding years a fourth leaf is formed and the fruiting head reaches maximum development.

Root harvesting takes place about five years after seedlings are transplanted.

Rotational planting of seedlings provides a marketable crop of roots each year on the Fromm farm. Seeds are harvested in early fall, and roots are dug after growth ceases about mid-October. The older

roots possess the most substance and when properly cured bring the highest prices. They are carefully washed and carefully handled during the drying process to avoid breaking the forks or marring the surface. Roots measuring more than two inches in diameter need to be dried for about six weeks, but smaller roots may be properly dried in less time.

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Successful ginseng culture depends to a large extent on the ability of the grower to provide environmental conditions resembling those which are favored by wild plants.

Plants and seeds must be covered directly after planting with a mulch. Spraying protects the ginseng from mildew and blight during the summer months, and is repeated according to frequency of rains.

Ginseng requires little cultivation, but grass and weeds must be kept out of the beds, and the surface of the soil needs to be scratched with a light tool whenever it shows signs of cracking. Women and girls, residents of the area do the weeding in the Fromm ginseng gardens.

Ginseng grows naturally in rather dense shade, and under cultivation it must be shielded from direct light to about one-fourth its normal intensity.

The building of ginseng arbors on the Fromm farms requires about 65,000 lath to the acre. Three inch steel beams weighing 4.1 pounds per foot, and provided with a channel, are strong enough to withstand winter snow conditions.

Posts set firmly in the ground about eight feet apart each way, and about seven feet above ground, provide support for the arbor sections. Lath are spaced about one-half inch apart to give the plants below the benefit of alternating light and shade.

Arbors are dismantled in sections and stored for future use after the roots are ready for the mechanical diggers. Fromm employees say that ginseng cannot be grown more than once on the same land, since no one has devised a practical method to disinfect the soil for the second crop. Other crops may be seeded successfully in old ginseng plots, but because of their choosy habits, ginseng plantings require a non-alkaline earth with granite subsoil.

To expand its ginseng operation, the Fromms from time to time have acquired adjoining farms until their original farmstead of less than 200 acres now stretches over thousands of acres.

Since no machinery is produced to perform the highly specialized tasks related to ginseng cultivation and harvesting, the Fromms over the years thought up various ingenious mechanisms to relieve the drudgery of digging, washing and drying ginseng root. The sprawling project utilizes scores of employees some of whom have been with the Fromms for years.

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the yield of cultivated ginseng varies greatly and depends largely on the suit-

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Some of the spraying is also done by women. The spraying protects ginseng plants from mildew and blight and is repeated according to the frequency of summer rains. Photo by Radunz, Record-Herald.



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ability of the conditions under which the crop is grown and on the skill and experience of the grower.

Prices paid for ginseng have fluctuated greatly depending on world conditions. The value of exporting roots during the period 1920-29 ranged between \$8.29 per pound in 1921 and \$15.13 in 1923, and averaged \$12.70 per pound.

Between 1930 and 1939 average value was \$5.40 per pound with a high of \$9.24 in 1930 and a low of \$3.62 in 1933. During World War II there was practically no export of roots.

Roots exported last year by Fromms totalled about 20,200 pounds and brought between \$11 and \$15.50 a pound for top quality. All of the product is exported to Hong Kong from whence it finds its way into areas with large Chinese populations, Malaya, Formosa, Indochina, Indonesia, and others. Little American ginseng is sent into China, although some is probably smuggled in. It is a highly priced item by the time it reaches the consumer.

"Smalley", the name by which he wishes to be known, has been a Fromm employee for many years, and is closely tied into the company's ginseng operations. Of Portuguese ancestry, and a former Hong Kong resident, "Smalley" will make one of his periodic trips back to Hong Kong in the spring to appraise market conditions for ginseng. His mother and other members of his family, in Hong Kong, are importers, and it is through their firm that ginseng from the Fromm farms is distributed into oriental markets.

Modesty obscures "Smalley's" far-reaching knowledge and skills in ginseng cultivation, but he describes operations artfully as he guides visitors through the Fromm plantations.

The United States Pharmacopoeia makes no medical claims for ginseng, but among the Chinese it is credited with great benefits.

According to old Chinese medical books, ginseng was taken internally to preserve youth and prolong life, hasten recovery from illness, prevent nervous disorders and excessive weariness. The botanical name for the species is *Pana* from the Greek (*Pas*) all, and (*akos*) cure, that is all-curing, a panacea.

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, ginseng is a plant of the forest floor and occurs in shady, well-drained locations in the hardwood forests from Maine to Minnesota, and southward into the mountains of the Carolinas and Georgia.

The export market for both wild and cultivated ginseng has existed for more than a century. The wild product in woodlands is highly favored in trade and brings the highest prices.

During periods of depression ginseng prices slipped to less than the cost of growing, and there were other periods where adverse conditions led the Fromm brothers to discuss the advisability of continuing ginseng culture. But at no time have they had the notion of turning their back on the crop. The business has had its many ups and downs for the Fromms it has been an exciting and rewarding adventure.