

# Tips for growing the best ginseng in Oregon

**Q**uestion: Can ginseng be grown in our area? Can you give some recommendations on growing this medicinal herb?

**Answer:** American ginseng is not native to Oregon but can be a terrific novelty plant for containers or your garden and landscape. It is a lovely perennial growing 1-2 feet tall, with palmately arranged leaves. A cluster of greenish-white blossoms forms a small umbel on the stalk in July, turning to small red berries by late August.

You must know that ginseng is an endangered plant in some areas and it is regulated by an international treaty to prevent over-harvest. Commercial sales and interstate movement of ginseng require certificates of origin. You can grow ginseng for personal use or direct-to-consumer sales, within the state, without a license. If, however, you want to grow and sell it wholesale, you need a license from the Oregon Department of Agriculture that costs \$25 per year. Certificates of origin are supplied to licensees upon request and licensees must report harvest and sales figures, annually.

Ginseng is an herb that has been used for centuries in East Asia for medicinal purposes. When used medicinally, ginseng roots are said to reduce the body's various stress responses. Studies have found energizing, cognitive-enhancing, and overall immune-boosting properties in the roots as well. This is old news to Native Americans and the Chinese, who have used a variety of ginseng for centuries.

American ginseng (*Panax quinquefolius*, L.) is a low-growing, perennial herb native to the rich deciduous forests of the eastern United States and Canada. Wild ginseng once thrived along most of the nation's eastern seaboard, from Maine



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to Alabama and west to Michigan, Wisconsin and Minnesota. Since the 19th century, American ginseng has been dug from the wild and exported to China. Due to over-harvesting, there is concern that our wild populations may be exterminated, so now the production of ginseng, at least commercially, is regulated.

However, it is OK to grow it in your yard and garden for personal enjoyment and can be grown successfully in our area.

If growing from seed, make sure your ginseng seed has been stratified (exposed to a period of cool, moist conditions to encourage germination). The most successful cultivated plots of American ginseng are located in areas mimicking its natural habitat. Dubbed wild-simulated cultivation, this method of growing ginseng is the least labor-intensive but also the slowest. With this approach, seed is sown thinly with minimal disruption to the ground. The plants are then left to progress as naturalized

plants. Look for a north- or east-facing gentle slope that is protected by a tall canopy of mostly hardwood trees. Ideally, the site should receive about 25 percent sunlight during the summer. Areas protected by oak, maple, sycamore, basswood, beech, chestnut, ash, elm, poplar or black walnut are favored. Avoid areas under conifers or close to ferns. Plants such as trillium are good indicators of desirable locations since those plants have similar requirements to ginseng and are frequently found growing near wild ginseng. The best soil condition for growing ginseng is moist, well-drained soil that is high in organic matter and calcium. Planting sites should have deep, dark humus with a good layer of leaf litter. Avoid compacted, waterlogged, or heavy clay soils. Optimum pH for the soil is 5.0-6.0. Remove any undergrowth in the planting area. Sow seed directly into the ground, or in planting containers, 1/2-3/4 inches deep and about 3 inches apart. Cover with a 3-4 inch layer of leaf or straw mulch and water well. The mulch will help keep the soil moist and weed-free. Keep the planting weeded and water regularly during the first growing season, but do not allow

the soil to become soggy. Mature plants produce red berries in fall. The seeds from these berries will be dormant for 18-20 months and then germinate during the second spring after ripening. Typically, a wild-simulated ginseng planting will be mature enough to begin harvesting roots after about three years. If properly maintained, these plantings will self-seed, regenerating the plant population for years to come.

To speed up seedling establishment look for 1-2-year-old transplants at your local garden center. Plantings may also be started by purchasing 1-year-old roots.

You can begin harvesting the roots at the end of the third growing season after planting. The active medicinal component, ginsenoside, will increase in the roots between the fourth and fifth years. It is highest in the roots right after the foliage has died down in early fall indicating the plants have entered dormancy. Dig the roots and gently clean off any soil being careful not to damage the root hairs. Dry the roots in a warm, well-ventilated area for 2-4 weeks.

Deer and slugs enjoy ginseng leaves. Younger plants can be destroyed with even light browsing,

where more established plants can regrow but may not have enough energy to produce seed. Use deer netting to protect plantings. Slug bait will protect plants from snail and slug damage.

The most common diseases to afflict cultivated ginseng are blight and root rot, which are both fungal problems. The best defense against these diseases is healthy forest soil, plenty of air circulation, and good drainage. If you find

evidence of disease, remove and destroy any affected plants.

With a little planning, you can amaze your friends with this unusual medicinal herb.

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*Do you have a gardening question? Please email, call, or visit the Douglas County Master Gardener Plant Clinic at [douglasmg@oregonstate.edu](mailto:douglasmg@oregonstate.edu), 541-672-4461, or 1134 SE Douglas Ave., Roseburg.*