

Growing Ginseng in Your Oklahoma Garden

Why consider Ginseng as a part of Your Home Garden?

Gardeners who would also like to make a profit often are attracted to Ginseng among other botanicals because it is possible to generate quite a bit of revenue without too much care once the plants or beds have become established. Ginseng grows best in zones 3-7. As a state on the extreme edge of Ginseng's habitat, planning and care in selecting a site are important factors.

The best way to begin growing Ginseng is to know about and mimic its successful growth in the wild. Temperature and soil moisture conditions generally are associated with north or east facing slopes with at least a 75% shade. In a forest, the best shade is provided by deep rooted, deciduous trees such as poplars and oaks. Ginseng grows best in a moist but well-drained soil.

There are three major ways to grow Ginseng. Fortunately, it still can be found in the wild. However much of the wild crop has been dug up. Foresters as well as anyone else who is concerned with our wild habitat have become increasingly concerned that wild Ginseng is not picked to extinction as it has been in many Asian countries. Out of this concern Ginseng is being cultivated under simulated-wild or what is called forest-grown conditions. The last and least favored method of growing Ginseng is under shade cloth. One study has shown Wild and wild appearing ginseng is up to one hundred times more valuable than alternatives grown under shade cloth. Wild-simulated forest planting of Ginseng is more profitable and less costly than is a crop that is grown under completely artificial conditions. In this method,

forest farmers introduce ginseng to an area and allow it to grow with little intervention from them. This is an area in which careful planning pays off. Ginseng flourishes in soil that is rich in leaf litter or even in soil augmented with straw. Both can be found at no or little cost and neither takes an undue amount of effort to apply. Either treatment can be added to a site that may otherwise be ideal. Doing so means the gardener does not have to worry about cost of fertilizers or with the cost of fungicides. Commercial fertilizers can be harmful to establishing healthy plants because even a slow-release treatment can overtax Ginseng's ability to balance nutrients. Apart from the profitability of Wild and Wild-simulated crops in comparison with those grown under shade cloth fungus is one of the biggest concerns for those who use this method. Because plants are grown close together, crops take careful monitoring throughout the 3 years it takes before roots are big enough to be harvested. Once a fungus begins in this type of operation, it can spread quickly wiping out the whole crop. This situation can set back the grower's ability to profit from plants anywhere between 1-3 years. The crop's fragility coupled with the expense of reestablishing beds, covering them with shade cloth, and keeping up with a regimen of continuous monitoring can quickly wipe out anyone who tries this method.

One question beginners ask about growing Ginseng is how buyers/consumers can tell how the crop was grown. Of course, many years of experience is helpful, but actually identifying the origins of roots is not that difficult. Ginseng grown under completely artificial means often have fat evenly tapered roots. On the other hand, there is some, but not quite as much difference between Wild and Wild-simulated roots. The former is likely to have thinner more distorted roots because of rocks and other debris found in a forest. Wild is also more likely to have the man-shaped configuration of roots than is Wild-simulated.

Growing ginseng at home will take a great deal of patience, primarily because the plants should not be harvested before they are three years old. Although Ginseng is a perennial, harvesting it destroys the plant. For this reason, it is a good idea to have a number of plants growing in a few test spots when beginning to plant Ginseng as a crop even on the most limited scale of “farming” it.

Wild and wild appearing ginseng is up to one hundred times more valuable than alternatives grown under shade cloths. A recent Sustainable Agricultural Research and Education or SERE grant undertaken over the last few years at Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies investigated strategies and established best practices for Ginseng crops grown in Wild-simulated forest plantings.¹

¹ Sources USDA, SERE, www.fws.org