

Panax

Araliaceae

Panax is derived from Greek *panakes* (all-healing, panacea, cure-all) with reference to the Chinese belief in its beneficent powers as an aphrodisiac and as a treatment that can be of some value in nearly all ailments.

The Chinese and the Koreans have used ginseng (root) as a panacea for hundreds of years according to earlier Western reports. (The leaves have also been used in China to treat dysentery.) Ginseng's underground stem is scarred with each year of growth and in 1952 a report in the Russian Journal of Botany declared that a root had been found that was calculated to be 400 years old. In the past ginseng root (which has been very highly prized by the Chinese for more than 5000 years as a tangible link between man and spiritual reality on which existence is based and as a bearer of the Spirit of the universe or ground ie. a manifestation of *Tu Ching*) has been the cause of wars in the Orient.

Mongolians and Chinese fought over land on which ginseng grew and one Mongolian emperor is even said to have erected a tall wooden-staked fence many many kilometres long all the way round a province bearing ginseng in order to deter thieves. Stories are still told of how many collectors once believed that the plants glowed at night and shot a coloured arrow at them in order to be able to trace them easily on the following day. Ginseng hunters were often killed by bandits for their booty and in China these marauders were known as 'white swains'. Its harvesting has also been monopolized by Oriental emperors. In the past Chinese gatherers would set out on Spiritual Journeys to seek out ginseng and on finding it would perform a ritual (which involved reciting an ancient chant) before digging up the roots.

Today the Korean Government controls domestic commercial production there, particularly as the most expensive and sought after commercially produced variety is Red Korean Ginseng. Wild ginseng, the Manchurian drug is especially prized even beyond the commercially cultivated ginseng but as it is so rare it is inordinately expensive. The different qualities of ginseng are determined by the shape, age and colour of the root. Commercial supplies of American ginseng available from Wisconsin (in Canada) are exported to the East and authorities note that it is highly likely that some of it returns to Europe and the United States and will have been unscrupulously traded as the higher quality Korean or Chinese root.

It is said to have been the Dutch who in 1610 brought the root to western Europe where its reputation spread rapidly. In that same Century it reached the French Court and the Sun King, Louis XIV (1638-1715) is said to have taken it as an aphrodisiac.

In the 20th Century most of the cultivated root has been used by China and Russia. Russian research earlier in the 20th Century is understood to have isolated a drug in the root that could influence metabolism, hormonal levels in blood and ease pain (although at the time Western researchers were unable to support these findings) – and Russian astronauts took ginseng to protect them from infectious disease during space missions. Now the claims made by Chinese medical practitioners with regard to the root's ability to aid mental and physical efficiency (one of hundreds of studies which have been carried out in many places occurred in 1957 with nurses at a London hospital and indicated improved concentration and endurance) and its beneficial qualities in treating the internal or

external physiological effects of for example ageing, disease or surgery are beginning to be recognized with some caution by Western pharmacologists.

In China ginseng is normally taken with other ingredients such as Chinese dates (*Ziziphus jujuba*) or liquorice (*Glycyrrhiza glabra*) to balance its powerful action. Despite suggestions to the contrary it is understood that today ginseng is not considered by Chinese practitioners to be an all-embracing panacea and is believed to be unsuitable for some disorders eg. acute inflammatory diseases. It is taken in treatments for diabetes, insomnia, stress, debility and ageing, and is prescribed for the improvement of stamina and concentration.