

Panax quinquefolius

[Synonyms : *Aralia canadensis*, *Aralia quinquefolia*, *Ginseng chinensileus*, *Ginseng quinquefolia*, *Panax americana*]

AMERICAN GINSENG is a perennial. Native to eastern North America it has tiny lily-of-the-valley scented, pinkish-white or yellowish-green flowers.

It is also known as *Amerikanischer Ginseng* (German), *Amerikansk ginseng* (Swedish), *Amerikkalainen ginsengjuuri* (Finnish), Chang, Cheng, Dwarf ground nut, Dwarf ground root, Five-fingers, Five-leafed ginseng, *Garantoquen* (Iroquois North American Indian), Gensang, Ginseng, Ginshang, Grantogen, Ground nut, Jinshard, Man's health, Man root, Ninsin, Occidental ginseng, Redberry, Sang, Seng, Shang, Strawberry ginseng, Tartar root, *Yunwiya usdi* (Cherokee North American Indian), and *Ženšen severoamerický* (Czech).

Warning – large doses can cause depression, insomnia, high blood pressure, hyperactivity, and nervous disorders. The plant must not be taken with any remedies containing iron, or with Indian or China teas. It should be avoided when suffering from any acute inflammatory disease, or from high blood pressure or bronchitis.

Since 1975 the United States has listed this species as threatened (not endangered) which has led to various harvesting restrictions in some States – in some collection is banned while in others the seeds of harvested plants must be scattered.

Quinquefolius is derived from Latin *quinque* (five) and *-folia* (leaved) components. American ginseng has similar general properties and uses to those of ginseng (*Panax ginseng*).

As with the relationship between the Chinese and the Koreans and their native ginseng species so the roots of American ginseng were also sacred for some North American Indian tribes. These were known to the Iroquois as *garantoquen* meaning 'man's thighs and legs separated' and to the Cherokee as *yunwiya usdi* meaning 'little men'. For the Cherokee, Potawatomi and Meskwaki Indians the combination of *yunwiya usdi* with any other ingredients increased the potency of those other ingredients – and it is rumoured that the knowledge of how to achieve this still lives with some Indian medicine men today.

A piece of the root was put in Menominee luggage when their hunters or warriors set out as this was believed to give protection from harm, and a piece of root carried on one's person reassured Chippewa Indians that good luck was on hand. The Seminole tribe used the root in witchcraft.

For several tribes including the Seminole, Meskwaki and Pawnee Indians different parts of the plant offered a reliable aphrodisiac.

American ginseng provided medicine for quite a few North American tribes. The Iroquois Indians used it to treat stomach upsets, liver ailments, tuberculosis, asthma, worms and venereal disease – and also to ease vomiting and enhance appetite, and as a stimulant. They and the Potawatomi used it to treat sore eyes (particularly on children among the Iroquois), and for ear disorders too. It was a Cherokee remedy for convulsions, coughs, wind, vertigo and headaches, and

the Creek and Iroquois Indians used it to treat fever. Iroquois and Houma tribes both relied upon it on occasion to ease vomiting, while the Iroquois and Micmac tribes turned to it as a remedy for some blood disorders. Creek and Seminole Indians chose it to treat various lung problems. Some female ailments were treated with the plant by the Penobscot, Iroquois and Cherokee tribes – and the Houma and Seminole Indians both used it as a remedy for rheumatism. It was applied to sores and boils by the Seminole and Iroquois tribes, and the Creek and Seminole Indians both applied it to wounds. Varying parts of the plant were sought after for a tonic prescribed by the Mohican, Seminole, Delaware, Cherokee, Iroquois and Menominee Indian tribes.

Records mention that a Jesuit missionary serving in China sent an account of ginseng (*Panax ginseng*) to a London publication in 1714 and mentioned that its root was used in Chinese medicine to ease pain and cure all manner of ills and a copy of this eventually came to the hands of Joseph François Lafitau (1681-1746) in Quebec. He was a Jesuit too but he worked in North America with the American Indians. The article so enthused him that helped by local Indians he searched for and found American ginseng plants growing in the Montreal area. Specimens of it were sent to his peer in China for verification and in due time advice of its comparability was received. At this time the Chinese were already finding that after centuries of harvesting the plant was becoming more and more rare and a new source of ginseng was needed. From 1718 the Canadian Jesuits dug up the root from the wild and exported American ginseng to China. Thirty years later the North American root was fetching 1\$ per pound in North America and nearly 5\$ per pound in China (after which the price fluctuated although demand continued). Fur traders' hunting grounds were in the areas in which American ginseng grew and 'seng' hunting (or 'sanging') for them and for local North American Indian tribes such as the Menominee, Cherokee and Chippewa proved to be as lucrative as traditional animal hunting – if not more so. (Apparently some receipts held in Philadelphia show that the famous American pioneer hunter, Daniel Boone (1735-1820) numbered among those who at some time in their lives sought out the elusive and valuable American plant.) Then for a period between 1895 and about 1904 ginseng was in added demand. Co-incidentally in 1895 a New York paper had reported on the first successfully cultivated crop in the United States. But the seeds take from nearly two to seven years to germinate and mature (and during that time they are vulnerable to various insects and fungal diseases) so, even though the article generated noticeable interest in the cultivation of American ginseng, added pressure on the native stock created by this surge in demand was unalleviated. The traders and the Jesuits (neither of whom had considered the need to conserve the plant growing in the wild) just dug up even more roots and contributed significantly to the depletion of natural stocks on the North American Continent – so much so that today this species is rarely seen uncultivated.

In 1740 Peter Collinson (1694-1768), an English botanist and naturalist, introduced American ginseng to England. As a woollen draper he traded with the North American colonies and his business (together with Quaker contacts) enabled him to exchange plant species.