



fearsome  
roots

in a quiet

forest

**DAVID A. TAYLOR** tracks the elusive  
the menacing forests

ginseng plant from  
of ancient China to the misty slopes  
of the Smoky Mountains.

Photography by **MARC KACZMAREK**

**FORESTS INSPIRE INTENSE** and intimate reactions: the feelings of peace and awe of temple groves. In mountain forests where ginseng grows, you find more unruly emotions. One evening on a hillside in the North Carolina section of the Great Smoky Mountains, I watched the last sunlight leave the tops of the maples and poplars and waited beside Lamon Brown, a park ranger on a stakeout for ginseng poachers. It was a chilly October evening. I was thankful the rain had held off. In the silence, the forest induced a mild delirium and time stretched like a clock by Dalí against a slowly darkening background.

*David A. Taylor is the author of Ginseng, the Divine Root: The Curious History of the Plant that Captivated the World (Algonquin Books, June 2006), from which this article is adapted.*

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The photographs in this article are of wild North American ginseng roots. They are selected from *Spirits of the Forest*, a portfolio by Marc Kaczmarek.

Two young oaks nearby were just dark vertical slashes. I watched a leaf tumble from the topmost branch of one, all the way down, down, down until it hit the forest floor. Fifteen seconds. Not long. And yet nowhere outside the forest was I likely to give those fifteen seconds to silent watchfulness.

In those moments, nature is clearly as much inside us as outside, beautiful and fearsome. I began to fathom the world of legend, where ginseng plants screamed in the night or changed into wild beasts. The Buddha admitted how even innocent forest sounds could be unnerving. He once confided, speaking of a night in the forest, “Either an animal came along, or a peacock broke a twig, or the wind rustled the fallen leaves. It occurred to me: surely this is that fear and dread coming.” Our relationship with the forest is a complicated intimacy, rich and unsettling.

Lamon wore a ranger hat on his shaved head and a mustache that bushed around his mouth. He explained in a whisper how the park’s main outlaws had been marijuana growers until rangers cracked down on the big patches in the 1990s and the growers switched to stovetop meth labs in their kitchens. These days, ginseng poachers far outnumbered the pot growers.

Having grown up near here, Lamon developed the eye of a ginseng collector, or ginsenger, early on. When he was a boy, his grandfather led him to a grove of walnut trees behind the house and revealed a cluster of ginseng plants that the old man had transplanted from deep in the woods. Even as a child, Lamon understood this was risky. If word got out about the plants, people would slip in and steal them. Ginseng was valuable.

Ginseng is a small, inconspicuous herb native to forests in both Asia and America. For many familiar with it, ginseng embodies the forest’s complexity and global interrelationships in a tightly compressed package. The plant is famous for contradictions: a mild stimulant that also has a reputation as a calming tonic, it’s a valuable medicinal herb with a clinical tradition that stretches back to 225 B.C.E., and also one of the world’s most widely touted ingredients in snake oil and energy drinks.

This rare plant’s reputed power to make people consider what is lasting and what is ephemeral reflects in part its endurance as a survivor, older than today’s continents. Biologists count its genus among “living fossils” since it has remained unchanged for more than sixty-five million years. The two main species of the *Panax* genus, Asian ginseng (*Panax ginseng*) and American ginseng (*Panax quinquefolius*), started as one and the same, growing in the deciduous forests that blanketed the megacontinent of Laurasia, which encompassed present-day North America and Eurasia. Eventually North America broke off, but its forests still resembled those of northeast Asia—which explains why most of the plant families native to China’s Hubei Province are also native to the Carolinas, and why magnolias, whose scent I always associated with Faulkner, abound in East Asia. The two ginsengs later adapted with slightly different chemical makeups. In Chinese medicine, Asian ginseng is “hot” and more of a stimulant; American ginseng is regarded as “cool,” and has a soothing effect.

**GINSENG EVOKES STRONG FEELINGS** in people like Bob Beyfuss, a county agricultural agent in upstate New York. You’d guess this from the tattoo on his right bicep: a full-color, life-size illustration of a huge ginseng plant. A botanical illustrator painted the image from a nine-year-old plant that Beyfuss provided, and a tattoo artist took most of a day to transfer the image to the arm: a flush of leaves on the shoulder, the red berries, and the brown, branchy root stretching down to his elbow.

Beyfuss always loved the forest, but he didn’t come to ginseng until a low point in his life. His first marriage had ended, and going to graduate school after his day job, he felt old among the other students and stressed by commuting two hours each way. He started chewing a bit of ginseng root daily and found that he could keep going through a full schedule of work, study, and exercise. It also gave him a niche in Cornell’s competitive agriculture program. “At Cornell, they know everything about everything,” he told me. “Nobody knew *nothing* about ginseng.”

Now he does everything he can to educate his rural constituents on ginseng's potential for keeping hillsides under forest cover. Its high value as a semi-domesticated plant growing under natural forest shade can help landowners handle rising taxes. But for him it's more than economics. More, even, than conservation. "Wisdom," Beyfuss wrote in one paper, "requires patience, persistence, curiosity, and hard work. These are precisely the same requisites for growing ginseng."

When I joined him on his first foray of the season in the Catskills, the early fall morning had turned warm by the time we reached the woods. This would be to locate ginseng, he said, not hunt it. Ginsengers don't just collect ginseng; they *hunt* ginseng, because ginseng doesn't just sit there. It tends to hide. "Ginseng is the tiger of the plant world," begins a report by TRAFFIC International, a watchdog organization that monitors endangered species. One grower in Wisconsin, a hard-nosed former accountant, talked about ginseng as if it were human. "In the spring," he said, "if they think the year's going to be crummy, they won't grow. They'll just lie dormant." He stopped himself and said of course plants don't think, *people* think. All the same, he insisted that ginseng could sense weather well in advance and respond to it.

Beyfuss ducked under a barbed-wire fence and I followed him. He knew the landowner, who lived some distance away, but we had the forest to ourselves. Beyfuss pointed out plants that signaled ginseng territory: baneberry, black cohosh, jack-in-the-pulpit (with red berries like ginseng's), and sarsaparilla, or as Beyfuss called it, "fool's ginseng" (a good impostor, except that the leaflets don't start from the same point on the stem). We passed hemlock and pines, partridgeberry, herb Robert, doll's eyes, maidenhair fern, and yellow-topped boletus mushrooms. Beyfuss picked a handful of the mushrooms to use later in seasoning food. He has devoted nearly as much time to learning how to use forest plants as he has to identifying them. "It's easier to remember plants if you know their uses. I was a city kid, so it took a while to learn the plants. It took me about two years to learn the trees, probably took four or five years more to learn all the shrubs, and I'm still learning the herbaceous vegetation."

We continued through maples and clusters of hemlock. The underbrush was sparse where the shade was heaviest. Beyfuss crossed a dry streambed that angled to our left. Standing on top of a berm on the far side, he inhaled.

"Smells like ginseng habitat," he said. "I don't know what it is, but I know that smell." I smelled only the

warm scent of decomposing wood and leaves. Beyfuss knew this terrain like an old lover.

**IN ASIA, POWER RADIATED** from the forest. During China's Warring States period (c. 475–221 B.C.E.), travelers carried herbs for protection against diseases, but often the medicine served mainly to calm their fears of forces beyond their control, such as wild beasts and flash floods. Time passed, and ginseng accumulated powerful names: the root that turns its back on the sun, the divine herb, the "returned cinnabar with the wrinkled face," and "abounds in spirits." It also gained a clinical reputation in the classical texts of Chinese medicine.

The popular imagination endowed ginseng with legendary abilities. In one story, a man kept being woken up in the night by someone calling his name. He would rouse himself and look around, but he never found anyone. Finally he scoured the area around his house and stopped before a magnificent waist-high ginseng plant. When he dug it up, the root was nearly six feet long and shaped like a person. Ginseng diggers also told of plants that escaped by morphing into a tiger, a man, or a bird. In one episode, a man happens onto a huge patch of big ginseng plants. Thrilled, he starts greedily unearthing them, until a little girl appears and starts throwing sand in his eyes. He staggers blindly away, and she chases him so far he never finds that spot again. The girl, naturally, was a morphed ginseng plant. The root also had the power to make itself resemble many other plants, which my walk with Beyfuss seemed to confirm. We saw poison oak and other plants with leaf arrangements very close to what we were looking for.

So ginseng hunting was never simply a walk in the woods. To people searching for it, the root assumed the cunning of the fiercest and most elusive forest dwellers. Running through the Chinese manuscripts is a fear that the plant could suddenly vanish or cause mayhem. Some collectors for the emperor sought to make themselves worthy with strict preparations, abstaining from alcohol, meat, and sex. As soon as a digger spotted the plant, convention required that he throw himself on the ground, shout, "Don't flee!" and declare his motives to be pure. Sometimes he had to keep shouting until others came running. Then one of them would carefully dig up the root while others kept watch to make sure it didn't escape.

By the 1700s, China's Qing dynasty was deeply dependent for revenue on its monopoly over the ginseng trade,



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and diggers were mired in a grim vassalage. Foreigners wrote of ginseng diggers sleeping in the wild, sheltered only by branches and leaves. A ginseng digger trekked through “vast and bewildering forests,” noted one, “always left alone to his thoughts and exposed to every discomfort; not knowing if today or tomorrow he may fall victim to the wild beasts that surround him.” They ventured into the hills in winter before the thaw, and spent the spring and summer on the frontier. “The Manchurians say that the success of the man who starts on a perilous journey across the taiga in search of the Root of Life depends entirely on his moral qualities,” a Russian observer noted.

“Our work is difficult and dangerous,” one digger said. The root was reportedly guarded by panthers and tigers. Even more terrifying was the little devil with glowing red eyes who would set the underbrush ablaze to flush diggers away. And sometimes it took the form of a ginseng root. “When the hunter approaches it, the root retreats further and further, until the man loses his way and perishes in the forest.”

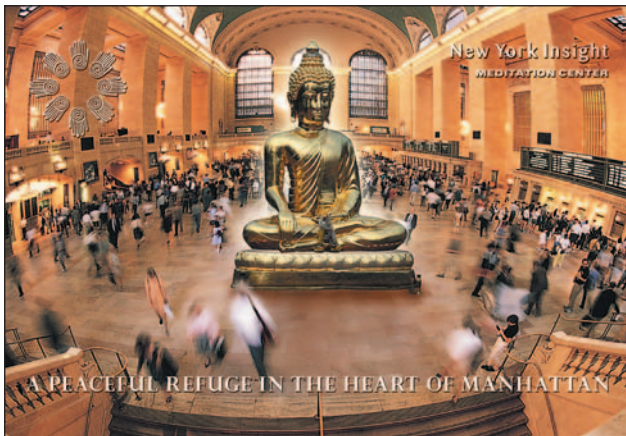
A sense of ginseng’s power arose among cultures of the New World too. “The Cherokees speak of the plant as a sentient being,” wrote the American naturalist William Bartram in 1791, “able (continued on page 114)

(continued from page 69) to make itself invisible to those unworthy to gather it.” Jerry Wolf, a Cherokee elder whom I met in western North Carolina, described the invocations required to lure ginseng from its hiding place. A shaman might give the ginseng seeker a chant with the instruction to say it in the woods and then walk toward something scary, perhaps a bear or a snake, to find the plant. From his own experience, Wolf told of once being deep in the mountains, hunting ginseng at the base of a cliff. He paused to eat a sandwich and on a moment’s inspiration, tossed part of the sandwich into a crevice in the cliff and said in Cherokee, “Help me find what I’m looking for.”

Before long he heard a noise, apparently coming from the crevice. Wolf told himself to finish his sandwich and not get scared. “I got up. I went around this big rock,” he said with a gesture that suggested about twenty feet. “And it was *rough* in that area. Just *straight* up and down. And I got around that rock cliff and I looked down the way I had come, and I saw a *big* ginseng.” Wolf held out his palm about thirty inches off the ground. He dug the plant and gave thanks by replanting the berries.

**THROUGH WAVES OF OVEREXPLOITATION**, wild ginseng’s numbers declined through the twentieth century. Most whole roots of wild ginseng are still exported to Asia, where they fetch a much higher price than farm-grown roots. In the wild, Asian ginseng is nearly extinct, and American ginseng appears headed that way. Wild ginseng is now protected under the Endangered Species Act, and exports are regulated by an international convention and monitored by inspectors in Hong Kong and elsewhere. Still, it’s unlikely that the plant populations can sustain losing many thousands of pounds of plant material each year.

“The better the medicinal plant, the more it threatens its own existence,” wrote James Duke, a retired medicinal plant expert, echoing a saying attributed to Chuang Tzu: “The tree on the mountain height is its own enemy. The grease that feeds the light devours itself. The cinnamon tree is edible: so it is cut down. The lacquer tree is profitable: they maim it. Everyone knows how useful it is to be useful. No one seems to know how useful it is to be useless.”



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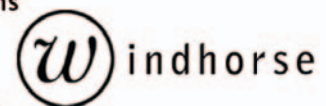
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Back on that hillside in the Great Smokies, I waited with park ranger Lamon Brown for poachers as the forest settled around us. He repeated quietly what others had said: that in western North Carolina, ginseng theft was sport and the root belonged to the bold. By law, ginseng theft is a felony as long as the grower has installed a fence. But enforcement is lax. “Going out in the forest to collect these wild plants is like fishing, hunting, playing golf for some people,” one person told me. “It’s part of what we do here.”

In that view, hunting ginseng is a God-given right. If you find it growing on somebody’s property you might ask permission, but as an attorney who had defended several ginseng poachers told me, with so many outsiders buying up mountain land for retirement homes, it’s hard to know who owns a hillside now anyway. He also voiced a skepticism shared by many locals, saying that park officials began cracking down on ginseng poachers only when they realized “that this natural resource that they have been graced with in the national parks is a product which a lot of people dig and sell,” and now officials wanted to keep

it to themselves. He thought the ginseng diggers were just practicing their way of life, a tradition older than any national park.

For him and others, devoting this ranger’s time to catch plant poachers is a waste of taxpayers’ money. There are more violent crimes than digging roots from a park, after all. Lamon replies that in nine years, ginseng poachers stole over \$5 million worth of root from this park. The long-term damage to the forest is more profound: local extinction. And ginseng has too much soul to lose.

I heard a rustle above the stream’s purling, and in the distance what might be a radio, or voices in a higher register. Maybe I was just spooking myself. I asked Lamon if he heard anything. “You too?” he whispered. “I thought the water was playing tricks on me.” He asked if I could say for sure that I had heard voices.

“It sounded a lot like voices,” I said. I imagined repeating that on a witness stand; it sounded equivocal. The noise seemed to move up the facing ridge, like someone traversing the slope. Or maybe it was nothing at all. With ginseng lurking in the woods, it can be hard to tell. ▼



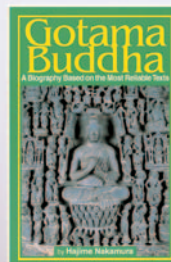
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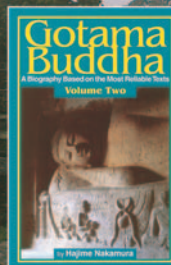
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