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AMERICAN GINSENG (*Panax quinquefolius*)

We provide stratified seed, which has been kept in moist sand for one year and is ready to plant. We ship our seed in the fall and recommend planting it as soon as possible after the seed arrives. If your seed arrives before you are ready to plant, keep it in a cool location (40–50°F/5–10°C), and damp. Never allow ginseng seed to dry out before planting or germination may be affected.

American ginseng is a slow-growing plant native to the woods of eastern North America. This plant has an upright stem supporting 3–5 leaves, each with 3–5 oblong, coarsely toothed leaflets. Tiny greenish-white flowers appear starting in spring or summer of the second year, with bright red berries that ripen in late July to October. The root is used medicinally as a general tonic to benefit vital energy and reduce heat in the respiratory and digestive systems.

LIFE CYCLE:

Perennial in Zones 4–8.

LIGHT/SOIL REQUIREMENTS:

American ginseng grows best in its natural habitat under a hardwood canopy with at least 70% shade, comprised preferably of oak, maple, sycamore, or basswood trees. Avoid pine, spruce, hemlock, red cedar, and other conifers due to their shallow root systems (which compete with ginseng for nutrients). You can also use artificial shade if you prefer to grow the plant as a row crop. A system that works well is wood lath or slat shade frames erected over the beds and supported by a framework of strong poles tall enough to walk under. The laths or slats are nailed so that about $\frac{2}{3}$ – $\frac{3}{4}$ of the direct sunlight is prevented from reaching the plants. In certain home garden situations, you can also plant ginseng close to the shady north side of the house.

American ginseng prefers a light loam soil that has high humus content and a pH of 5.0–6.0. Work the beds 6 inches deep, raising the center of the beds to prevent water from collecting around the plants. Amend heavy or clay soils with leaf mold (rotting hardwood tree leaves) or well-decomposed compost to lighten the soil and improve the drainage. Good drainage is critical to ensure healthy ginseng plants.

CULTURE:

Sow seeds $\frac{1}{2}$ – $\frac{3}{4}$ inch deep (never more than 1 inch deep) and about 3 inches apart (15–20 seeds per square foot). Mulch with 3–4 inches of leaves or straw, and moisten the mulch to ensure that it remains in place. Stratified seeds planted in the fall will germinate the next spring, usually in late May. If your seedlings are slow to emerge in the spring, you may need to gently remove some of the mulch. Replace the mulch after the plants emerge. New shoots will be small when they first appear, and will look like bean sprouts with three small leaves. Keep well-weeded, but take care in weeding around young plants to avoid disturbing the roots. Once ginseng is well established, mulch will help to prevent weed growth.

HARVEST:

Harvest may begin at the end of the third growing season but the ginsenoside content increases dramatically between the fourth and fifth years — many growers wait until then to harvest. Roots should be dug in early fall (late August or early September) as the ginsenoside content is highest right after the tops have died down and the roots have entered dormancy. Clean thoroughly by washing, being careful not to remove any rootlets. Place roots in a single layer and dry on screens in a warm, but not hot (maximum of 100°F/38°C), ventilated place that is out of direct sunlight. Expect a drying time of about 15–30 days.

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