

American Ginseng: Caleb Trivett Interview

Audio Transcription

[Guitar music in the background: "Southbound" by Doc and Merle Watson, from *Classic Mountain Songs from Smithsonian Folkways*]

Narrator: As the market for American ginseng grows more competitive, in both the domestic and international economy, there's some concern from harvesters and growers about the preservation of wild ginseng. To learn more about this, we visited with Caleb Trivett, a ginseng dealer located in Tennessee. Caleb has been familiar with ginseng since he was a young boy, when a hike with his grandfather led to an exciting discovery.

Trivett: It was on a dry August day. We were looking for a deer. Slowly moving through the forest, hearing the splash of the dry leaves. My grandfather, being afraid of rattlesnakes, shouted out, "Look out!" I knew I was already bitten. It was over. I turned around. I said, "Where is it?" He said, "My God, there's a bunch of ginseng!" He said, "Someone will dig that ginseng, Caleb. Go dig that." And it was hard work, you know. The forest has roots, rocks in there, and I'm rooting through the woods, trying to get the ginseng out, and I'm sweating, and I don't know if I like it or not. And he starts telling me about the hundred dollar bills, and it doesn't bother me anymore! [laughs] I dig a little harder. And over the years, I couldn't wait 'til the moment we could dig it, when the season opened.

But ginseng hunting was never about the money. The allure of getting paid was always there. It's just the time spent in the mountain that I enjoy the most. Being left alone, always in awe of what's around the next tree stump, or what's around the next corner, and then sometimes you see a ginseng plant and you think, "That plant's older than I am." I've spent a month looking for one, and I think I'll just leave it right there, 'cause it's too nice to dig. To sit there and think about something in its pure form that is happy, and sharing that, that's what brings me back to the mountain to look for the ginseng.

Narrator: Now, as a professional harvester and dealer, Caleb grows wild-simulated ginseng. This is a practice of growing ginseng in conditions that mimic its natural growth in the mountains. Focused on the benefits of wild-simulated ginseng for plant preservation, Caleb is hopeful of popularizing this method across the industry.

Trivett: If every plant survived, and I survive, I'd like this to be the first true wild-simulated seed bank for the nation. Something so precious that the ginseng would never be dug. That the seed itself and the tops would be enough to sustain us. If someone actually had a wild-simulated ginseng strain, a true wild-simulated strain, where cultivated seed goes for a hundred [dollars] a pound, wood-grown seed, good wood-grown, for one-fifty, what price would I put on thirty-year-old genes? Whatever I wanted. I probably wouldn't sell it for less than a thousand. I'd probably want it for my family. And if

there was no plant living beyond thirty years or forty years, the memory's getting less and less with each generation. Somebody's got to put the effort forth.

Narrator: But as Caleb has set forth on his dreams of growing wild-simulated ginseng, he has expressed some concern within the industry. Many ginseng diggers are digging out of season, trying to quickly make money. This has created an over-saturation of poor-quality ginseng. Here he shares with us his thoughts regarding irresponsible stewardship of the plant and his ideas for conserving wild American ginseng for generations to come.

Trivett: You know, when I was first getting started, I would call and ask a dealer about it. No one offered me a fair price, ever. When I said, "Look, I have a hundred pounds of wild-simulated ginseng that looks just like wild, they automatically said that they would pay me, you know, if market was eight [hundred dollars a pound, dried] they would want to pay me six. So, automatically 25% less, and they haven't even looked at the product. That's not fair. That's just someone looking to steal a product. And that's how the whole industry is. You know, maybe they're assuming that since you told them you grew it, you've already decided it doesn't look wild. They must assume it has a certain quality to it, or just outright attempt to steal it, and it does not work that way. It's either good ginseng or it's not.

The diggers right now, they're digging it and selling it today [before legal harvest season starts]. Because they want the money today. What I think needs to be done in this industry, to effect the proper change to save the plant, the price needs to flat line around what it is now. If the price goes up to 10,000 [dollars a pound], there will be so much dug that it will be dug into extinction. So, between 800, 1,500 a pound, that's where ginseng needs to stay to preserve the plant. To effect this, you have to stop the motivation to dig the ginseng out of season. The motivation is to make money. Right now, somebody's digging ginseng on that mountain over there, and they're going to sell it to somebody who lives here, close. And they're going to give them nothing. They're going to give them ten, twenty dollars a pound, fifty dollars a pound. And then they're going to come and sell it to *me* maybe, unknowingly, and as long as these people are allowed to operate that way, the harvesters will dig it out of season, the plant will not reproduce, and the price will skyrocket when it's all gone. And then it will be over.

Simultaneously, we have to go to a green harvest, where the plant has a chance— it has been proven to be reproduced. But the going green and making sure the plant has produced berries, at least the plant has reproduced. This ginseng being dug in May, June, and July has not reproduced seed, and we're missing out on those seeds, those *precious* genes. So, to force them into a green industry, you're going to have to bust all the people who are buying illegal ginseng, illegal green ginseng, out of season. So, we go green, we license the harvesters, and strengthen the penalties, all around.

Narrator: Despite the need for reform in the ginseng industry, Caleb remains committed to conserving ginseng and safely harvesting and dealing it. Caleb's passion for this mission is unwavering, and to show how deeply rooted ginseng is in his life, he even treated us to a little tune he wrote.

[guitar music]

Trivett [singing and playing guitar]:

Take me back to the mountain, where the ginseng grows ten feet tall,
Take me back to that valley, the place where I lived when I was small.

[guitar music]

Come ride with me to Tennessee, where the mountains they are so old,
Come look upon my homeland, and the people here, strong and bold.

Deep inside the mountain, you may find a cure or remedy
For love, for hate, for cancer, Earth's love she shares for free.

[guitar music]

Take me back to that ridgetop, where the wind blows worry away,
Take me high in Appalachia, where clouds even bring a sunny day.

[guitar music]