American Ginseng: Chip Carroll Interview
Audio Transcription

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

Narrator: American ginseng, a plant with both economic and cultural significance throughout, is often over-harvested for its high selling price, bad regulations surrounding the plant, and a lack of education of proper harvesting method; thus, causing conservation concerns among ginseng experts. Today, we talked to Chip Carroll, at United Plant Savers in Rutland, Ohio, about his experience with ginseng and conservation efforts. Here's how Chip got started.

Carroll: In college, I met one of my main teachers, named Rebecca Wood, who introduced me to ginseng for the first time. I had known of ginseng, heard of ginseng, but I never even knew it occurred in Ohio where I grew up, or that it was a plant that we could go find in the woods. So, then, in college, I began to spend a whole lot more time in the woods and began to appreciate the plant more and more. And then, when I graduated from college, I did an AmeriCorps. I was one of the first people involved in their forestry program. So, it just evolved from there. I started planting ginseng almost immediately, and now it's been over twenty years that I've been planting and growing it, and in the interim I became a ginseng buyer for a number of years, in Kentucky and Ohio, just so I could learn more about the business of ginseng, and it's just kind of snowballed from there.

I call it the "trifecta." [Ginseng] really ties together the economy, the social, and the environmental aspect for people. And it's a great tool here in the Appalachian region, that gets people interested and engaged, and involved in their forests. Thinking of their forests for more than just the trees. And also as a tool to generate income. I mean, as you all know, there are families that have depended on these—not just ginseng, but in a large part ginseng—for a long, long time. And even in recent history, when I was buying from folks, it was to pay the electric bill, or Christmas shopping, or school supplies, or "I need a new washer," you know. Transitioning those folks into growers, you know— this is a plant that, if you have even a bed under a maple tree in your backyard, and harvest a little bit annual, and make a little bit of money. If you have a woodlot—most people around here do or have family that do—you can definitely make some money. And it's fascinating and fun, and again, it just gets people thinking about all these different aspects. And I think it's a great tool to kind of tie it all together—a lot of the problems we're having in this region.

Narrator: We asked Chip about the challenges facing him in his work in ginseng conservation. Here's what he had to say.

Carroll: We've had plants dug out of season, we've had plants impacted by practices such as drilling for oil and gas, or timber harvesting, ATV trails. The Wayne [National Forest] does a lot of burning, in the name of oak regeneration. We've had a lot of sites burnt. I often put in my annual report that the biggest threat to the ginseng on the national forest is the Forest Service.

Narrator: When we asked about the way forward to overcome these issues, Chip's answer was clear.

Carroll: Education. A lot of the states are mandated by the Fish and Wildlife Service, to provide educational materials to the diggers, but they do a really poor job of that. Nobody's policing any of that, and nobody's working collectively to come up with those educational materials. We've talked about requiring harvester licensing, which is also controversial. You get into the whole "do I want to share my information with the state" kind of thing. But we're talking about people having to go through a whole thing like a hunter safety course, before they could harvest these herbs, right? It's a little educational class. You have to go for a couple of hours on a Saturday, and if you complete your class, you can get your permit.

I really think that education's the— where things are most lacking and all these people out there doing stuff. I think 90% of them are well intentioned, and they want to do the right thing, and they know that Grandpa did it, and some of them are still tending Grandpa's patch, you know. People want to keep this plant around. So, they want to do that, but they don't know how to best do it. A lot of the old, the old-time practices, are probably not best suited for that purpose, at this point in the game.

Beyond education, if I had the magic wand, habitat loss, and managing species like the white-tailed deer, whose population is historically much larger than it's ever been and is having a major impact on the population of these medicinal plants, ginseng in particular.

Narrator: One means of ginseng conservation is the regulation of how old a root must be before it is harvested. Allowing the roots to grow for ten years or more ensures the healthy preservation of the species.

Carroll: I think there's a general consensus amongst those of us kind of "in the know" in the ginseng world that we've all wanted a ten-year rule for a long time. Yeah, I think there's a small portion of us who wouldn't mind seeing a twelve- or fifteen-year-old rule. But rules like that have to be implemented slowly and have to be— Again, it comes back to transmission and education. How do you transition people into that in an effective way? You can't just pick a day and then make all these law-abiding people suddenly criminals, because they didn't know it went from a five to a ten. Which we've kind of run into before in trying to work on some of these policies. So, including the public in these decision-making discussions is huge. How you really get into those hills and hollers and reach those folks, who have been doing this for generations, and don't get the internet, don't have TV, maybe don't have access to these educational materials or resources, have never been to a workshop.

Those are the folks. And I think in a large part, probably, half of the ginseng harvested is coming from folks like that, who aren't really in touch with the rest of us. So, that's a huge challenge.

And here's something that's a real take-home, that's become apparent to me, in the last twenty years. Is that, harvesting done properly, at the right time of year, when those berries are red, and at the same time you're planting those seeds properly, in the right places. And maybe not following the regulations, if they say, "must be within twenty-five feet of the place the plant was dug." You know, maybe sometimes you have to move those seeds a little bit further up the hollow, because they're going to be safer. But, altogether, done properly, done at the right time of year, all of these populations should be expanding drastically rather than reducing.

But the harvester at the end of the day is not the biggest threat to ginseng. And when I first became involved in this work, in this industry, that was the thing I heard all the time. You know, "the diggers, and the diggers, and the harvesters and the harvesters." And when you start to get the reality of what one person with the trowel or the shovel can do in one day, compared to what these fracking operations can do, or the mountaintop removal operations, or even a logging operation, or an ATV trail. Or the white-tailed deer, right? It doesn't hold a torch to what we do with our two little feet walking through the woods.

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