

# American Ginseng: Mary Lawson Interview

## Audio Transcript

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

Narrator: Mary Lawson is a veteran ginseng buyer located in Abingdon, Virginia, where she runs her own ginseng and herb business while also running Gross Recycling Company. We sat down with Mary to hear her story about buying ginseng from diggers, passing ginseng knowledge on to younger generations, navigating the ginseng industry as a woman, and more.

Lawson: Well, like I said, it was something me and my husband did. And you know, growing up doing it, we knew a lot of people who messed with it. And there wasn't anyone in our area, and you had to go off somewhere selling it, so I started over here in '96. There's more people who've found out about me, and they'll come and talk to me, then, and so a lot of new buyers over here.

Narrator: As an experienced buyer, Mary has learned just exactly what wild ginseng looks like and often teaches her customers along the way, when they try to sell her ginseng that was harvested too early or stored improperly.

Lawson: You had to learn what you were doing, you know, and what to look for, what kind of quality the buyers wanted, and, you know, what paid the most, and make sure they weren't sliding that woods-grown in there! [laughs] Because back in the late '80s, it got really bad. You know, there were a lot of people growing it, a lot of people trying to slide it by. I don't think there's as much doing it today as there was, 'cause I know when I first opened here, there was a few guys that tried to bring it in on me. I had one guy who brought it in here, and he had it in a sack. There was eleven roots and it weighed thirteen pounds. Like big softballs or turnips or something! It wasn't wild. I'd never seen anything like it.

I probably turned away more ginseng this year, from people who don't know what they're doing, than I ever have. They froze it, and that's the *worst* thing you can do. They burn it, they put it in microwaves, they kept it too long. I mean— oh, I couldn't tell you the poundage I've turned away this year. I love it. I love doing it. There's just— this time of year, there's just— it's a totally different group of people that you meet. You know, and the ones who take pride in it really take pride in it.

Narrator: While talking to Mary, she also gave us some insight into what she calls "being a woman in a man's business."

Lawson: Well, most people don't think this is a woman's kind of work, but I've raised my daughter, I've got two grandsons, sent them through school. I work every day, pay my workers, take care of my bills, keep the wolves away from the door. That's the main thing! [laughs] A lot of guys try to manipulate you. They come in here, because I'm a woman, they think that they can manipulate me. Mm-mm, nope! In my business, the customer is not always right! [laughs]

They think they can intimidate me because I am a woman in a man's business. I had this guy, I mean, literally, cuss me. Because the season— we hadn't started buying yet, and it was getting ready to open up, and he come in here one day and asked me when I was going to start the green out, and I said, "I think it's going to start somewhere around a hundred dollars a pound." And he cussed me, and said, "It's one thing to try to make a profit than to try to f-ing rip people off!" I said, "Excuse me?" He said, "I'm getting \$1,100 in North Carolina." I said, "Sir, then that's where you should take it." I'm trying to be quiet. He kept running his mouth, man, so I had to demand that respect. I said, "I have earned it, and you won't come into my office and talk to me that way." I said, I told him, "I don't know how you talk to the women where you're from, but you will not talk to me that way." I said, "I have too many good customers to put up with buttholes like you."

Narrator: Ginseng diggers looking to make quick money often harvest the root too early and sometimes dig without proper permission. Mary shared with us her experiences dealing with illegal ginseng hunting.

Lawson: I actually reported this gentleman that I knew. He wasn't licensed. I was here twenty-four years, and I never bought out of season. And I won't, you know, because I said, it's not worth losing my license over. But I knew this gentleman that was and reported him. They didn't do nothing. So, I don't know what you're going to do if you reported him and they don't *do* anything. I've had people call me in May and June, and say, "What are you paying for ginseng?" I'm not paying. "What are you paying for green ginseng?" I say, "I'm not buying green ginseng. You'd better not *have* any green ginseng." I said, "You're not allowed to dig it 'til September 1." "Oh, no, this was dug last year." And it's still green? Needless to say, they really watch what they say to me now! [laughter]

Narrator: One of the greatest traditions of American ginseng is the ability to share knowledge of the root with younger generations. Here, Mary shares her hopes for continuing to sustain her business and her passion for ginseng.

Lawson: And one thing that's hurting the business right now is the old-timers have passed away, and the younger generation— there's very, very few younger generation that's doing it, that's getting out there and getting it. And I tried to pass as much as I can to my grandsons, and they don't forget anything I tell them. They really don't. But it's good to teach them things about when we were younger, so that they understand where we come from. But I'm hoping to teach them this, so that when something happens to me, they can make a living.