

American Ginseng: Paul Hsu Interview

Audio Transcript

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

Narrator: Paul Hsu of Hsu's Ginseng Enterprises has become one of the most prominent ginseng suppliers in the United States. Since emigrating from Taiwan in the '60s, Paul has had decades of experience in ginseng growing and dealing. Smithsonian curators spoke to him at his Wisconsin ginseng farm in October 2019.

Hsu: I came to the States 1969 after graduating from college in Taiwan, and finally I got a scholarship to study for graduate work, a master's degree in social work from the University of Denver. They gave me a full scholarship, so I came in 1969.

I got a stipend from the State of Wisconsin to come here to work for them for two years. A friend of mine, a colleague of mine, said, "Hey, do you know anything about American ginseng?" I said, "I heard of it but I've never seen it. Never used it. My mom used to use it, Korean red ginseng, once in a while when we could afford it, you know. But I don't know anything about American ginseng." So I said, "Can you show me that?" So next day he brought me an article, I read it, mentioning that there were people growing ginseng around here, about twenty of them. And I got kind of interested. I say, "Hey, maybe I" — I thought about my mom, "maybe I can buy something for my mother."

So I did mention that in a letter to my dad, and he said, "Your brother just graduated from college, from business. He wants to do import/export business. Maybe you can help him." Oh, good. So I bought two or three pounds of sample and sent them home. In about a year, my father wrote me. He said, "Son, you probably won't believe me, but anyway. What you sent to your mom really helped save her life." I said, "In what sense?" He said, in a letter, he said, "There's no indigestion problem anymore. Used to be not able to eat one bowl of rice per meal, right now, two, three of them now. Vigor returned and all that." I thought, there's no medical— medicine like that. Anyway, I sent more home.

So, my wife and I kept talking about ginseng. And, at that time, I got a list from the State Department of Agriculture. They gave me twelve names, the people growing ginseng around here. And so one afternoon, I came up here and looked into it. So, my wife said, "You keep talking about this. I can go work, and in case you fail, I can feed the family." And I said, "Okay! If you think I could go and become a farmer, why not?" So, we moved to farm up here and start ginseng business. Growing and mail order. I start mail ordering first. And in about a year or two, I bought this farm, across the street.

In 1970— okay, we moved up here in 1976. Okay. 1976. One acre of ginseng, they can harvest about 100,000 U.S. [dollars]. 1976. About 300,000 now. Per acre. Who in their right mind would show people how to do this? [laughs] They all kept it in their family, in their relatives, in-laws, brothers, sisters, and there were less than twenty people doing that, twenty families we should say, doing that. And especially I was buying for mail order. They certainly don't want to turn a buyer into a farmer, to be a competitor.

So, the first fifteen years were very, very tough. Okay. [laughs] It's a long-term investment and very labor-intensive type work. It's not an easy— You know, a lot of advertisement or a seed seller or whatever will paint it as a get-rich-quick type of thing. No, no, no, it's very slow. Very slow. And you had to be— stay with it, and you had to be successful, otherwise, no, you won't make it. It's not that easy. It's not an easy job. It's not a good investment either. Unless you can be persistent in doing all this. It's not an easy crop to grow. It's— I call this a crazy business! I was looking thirty years down the road. The market in China would open up at that time.

In the '70s, '80s, I was the first buyer who came in and settled here. Because most of the buyers come from Hong Kong. 1976 I moved here. Very few people sent over there. There were more ginseng buyers coming in from Hong Kong. I was the first buyer from Taiwan, settled in here. Chinese were from Hong Kong. Nobody settled here. They all came here for a week or a month, and then leave. 1986, I moved up here. 1987, I bought a farm. '87, then, I started planting.

Narrator: Since then, Hsu's Ginseng Enterprises has grown into what it is today.

Hsu: We have six offices throughout United States and Canada. And we are on Amazon. Two people work on Amazon. And in China, we've got about 600 employees, in China, yeah. Thirteen provinces, ten branch offices.

Narrator: Paul has also worked closely with the Fish and Wildlife Service to increase conservation efforts of wild ginseng in Wisconsin.

Hsu: The future is very tough, okay. Wild ginseng has to be preserved. I think the federal government has to be more strict. To enforce the rule, in the state, I know, but the state has to be stronger, rather than wishy-washy. A lot of states are wishy-washy. Digger has to be educated as well. Go through a day training, pass a test, and then you give a license. And also with limited number. You don't give licenses to everybody, including the dealer. It's a special privilege. If we don't do something—too late.

[guitar music]