

American Ginseng: Robin Black Interview

Audio Transcript

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

Narrator: Robin Black serves as the West Virginia Forest Service ginseng regulator, where she works with ginseng diggers and dealers to ensure that they remain compliant with different state laws. When we visited with her, she shared her background with ginseng and how she ended up in her current role.

Black: My dad used to dig ginseng in Webster County when he was growing it. But I'm not a ginseng digger. I've never been out on a ginseng dig. I've been to a ginseng *farm*. When we did the ginseng grower program, we did a demonstration, teaching the guys how to, you know, look for where the ginseng would be, and that kind of stuff, but that's about as close to it as I have been! I started as Kelly Girl. I did. I started as a Kelly Girl, and when I came here, the lady who was in charge of the ginseng program had just retired. So, I ended up entering all the data that— from the dealer's reports were coming in, into spreadsheets.

Narrator: While Robin may have fell into her role as a regulator, she's been in this position for thirty years, working with local dealers to make sure ginseng season runs smoothly.

Black: My job is, as the ginseng coordinator, the sole proprietor of doing the— licensing the dealers, entering the data that they provide, verifying the data, providing certificates out to my field people to certify the ginseng, and auditing the dealers to make sure that they've reported what say they bought and what they say they exported, and then the annual report to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. And that goes from— I start working on all that stuff in July, and I finish up the end of May.

Narrator: Robin's role also includes working with the ginseng growers' program, a conservation initiative in West Virginia that works to teach people to safely cultivate their own ginseng.

Black: And with the Division of Forestry, we have a part of a conservation effort, dealing with a ginseng grower's program. And basically that started because U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service was thinking about raising the age for export to ten years. And we had a lot of people who weren't interested in that, but we had a group called the West Virginia Ginseng Growers Association that wanted to see about having growers, so that if ever the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service would close the season, they'd have ginseng that they could sell. And it would have to be wild-simulated, woods-grown, or cultivated. Those are the three artificially propagated brands. And with us, we had to take that through the legislature, and sometimes getting stuff through the legislature is *really* hard. But,

luckily, with the backing of the West Virginia Growers Association, it allowed us to add fees, which we didn't have before. It was an unfunded mandate. So we were able to add a fee to our dealers, 'cause we were certifying ginseng for free. They were getting a dealer's permit for free. It's now \$100 for a dealer's permit, and two dollars a pound for certification. That helps fund those people that go out and do our certifications and our paperwork.

Now, with the ginseng growers' program, we have about a hundred people that are planting ginseng seed, and then just letting it go, so that they have it. And many of those, they want to keep ginseng on their property. They may never sell it. But it's there, and they know that they have something for their children. It's just something for their children to have later down the line. But, then again, we have people that come in, and if you mention you're growing ginseng, they come in, and they poach it. They come steal it. And we tell people, "Don't tell them where you're at." Nobody can request who all is on the ginseng grower program, where their ginseng plants are planted. We know where they're at, and we can help them when needed, but as far as— if someone calls and says, "I want to know if such and such a county has ginseng planted" "Sorry, I can't tell you that!"

Narrator: Different TV shows that promote misconceptions of ginseng have greatly affected Robin's work. She shared with us how TV has popularized ginseng but can neglect the importance of conservation.

Black: The first year that was on, I had many phone calls. People wanting to buy ginseng, wanting to get into ginseng, wanting to sell ginseng, and then I had people calling wanting to grow ginseng. The phone call consisted of this:

"Yes, I'd like to grow ginseng. How big will it be by next year?" [laughter]

"You're lucky to even have a rootlet by then."

"Well, doesn't it grow as big as a carrot?"

I'm going, like, "No, not in *one year!*" [laughter] I said, "You're looking at twenty years, to thirty years to get as big as a carrot."

And he goes, like, "Oh." *Click*. And that's what some of the phone calls were like.

I mean, "I want to go dig ginseng. Where can I go dig ginseng?"

And I'm going, like, "Do you own property in the state of West Virginia?"

"No."

“Well, then, you must have written permission.”

And they’re going, like, “Why?”

I said, “That TV show is fictitious.” There’s a little bit of truth, but not much.

Narrator: Despite this influx of national interest, Robin has found there still needs to be a push for younger generations to embrace ginseng.

Black: The one thing I’ve noticed over the years, in the thirty years that I’ve been doing this—I’ve noticed the amounts of harvested has gone down, unless the price is really high, because your younger generations are not interested. As your older generation used to go out and do it get older and can’t get out and hunt like they used to, the amount harvested goes down.