

Elixir of the Gods

Red Korean Ginseng as a Functional Food

Long since known as the Root of the Gods in Asia, the modern world has come to recognize Red Korean Ginseng as a valuable medicinal plant for the maintenance of cerebral fitness and an intact immune system. Health-conscious people are continually looking for reliable ways to stabilize an active spirit and a healthy body. Such an ally is Red Ginseng! Whoever eats the root will be fully equipped with the prerequisite vitamins and minerals for physical well-being and an active mind. Famous ginseng eaters of modern times such as Henry Kissinger, the Vietnamese soldiers, various well-known astronauts, and diplomats including Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai have helped to promote the plant's benefits and enjoyed its invigorating properties.

Ginseng's health enhancing and life prolonging properties have been acknowledged for almost 3000 years. A healing plant that promotes mental acuity and an intact immune system, it increases the power of resistance to stress within the body. The original ginseng strain and source of genuine root extracts is the Eastern Panax ginseng C.A. Meyer, which belongs to the Araliaceae family and ranks highly amongst the most famous herbal remedies in the pantheon of Traditional Chinese Medicine. Ginseng equilibrates the body and helps to maintain the balance of Yin and Yang. It is considered to be a nutritious and noble foodstuff that imbues the consumer with the ability to think faster and live longer.

In Korea as well, the healing forces of ginseng have been recognized for centuries. It was the privilege of the acting emperor to receive the best root of the yearly harvest. Usually, however, the root was used as a tonic to invigorate weak bodies — only rarely as a curative medicine against specific diseases. Ginseng reached Western cultural shores some time ago when, in the 9th century, Arabian warriors brought the plant to Spain. After the Conquest of Cordoba in 1236 by King Ferdinand III, he burnt plundered roots as "witchweed." And, for a considerable period of time, the Eastern art of healing was considered to be "devil's stuff" and ignored in Europe. The arrival of the modern age, improved trade and long-distance



travel brought about a spiritual renaissance concerning the Far East, permitting limited access to the most popular forms of natural healing in Asia.

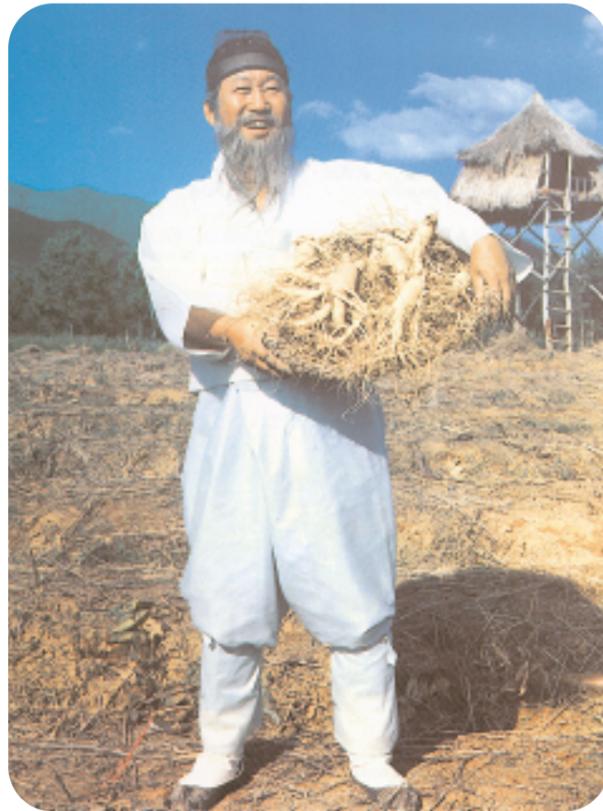
Legends and myths surround the “people root” because of its physical form. Named ginseng because it is shaped like a man, it is believed to embody his three essences (body, mind and spirit). Korean legend tells of a student named Kang, some 1500 years ago, who was caring for his sick mother. In his dreams, he met a mountain god who spoke to him and said: “On the summit of the Kwanumbong Rock grows a plant with red berries. Cook it with its roots and give the essence to your mother.” The student obeyed the godly advice and, subsequently, his mother made a full recovery from her incurable ailment. The magic root in the shape of a person has been cultivated ever since. Modern lifestyle industries were soon to discover the miracle root and have eagerly exploited and refined it for various product applications. Dilutions and extracts of ginseng can be found in drinks, teas, chewing gums, nutritional supplements, cosmetics, soaps, shampoos and even cigarettes. It is available to buy in a multiplicity of tablets, pills, special preparations and formulations throughout the international health markets. Today, ginseng eaters all over the world can appreciate this fine-smelling herbal root and its energizing capabilities.

A Natural Adaptogen: Effects of Ginseng

The Root of the Gods is by no means a drug with specific pharmaceutical activity; it is rather a means to attain better health and a higher quality of life. As an elixir of regeneration, its therapeutic prowess comes from its status as a noble food that enhances the natural defence mechanisms in the body. As verified by studies from Japan, China and Korea, Western medics often discarded the root as a weed, whereas in Asia it was praised as a universal remedy with considerable merits. However, the rapid increase of the use of complementary and alternative medical therapies in recent years, and the fact that herbal medicines are among the most prevalent treatments used, has cast a different light on the use of ginseng in the West.

An adaptogen is a natural herb product that increases the body's resistance to stresses such as trauma, anxiety and bodily fatigue. Ginseng is a basic adaptogen with a high content of saponin and antioxidants that combat carcinogenic free radicals. The human body might, for example, become overly acidic, and function in a suboptimal manner. Ginseng, as a basic, non-toxic substance, reduces the body's over-acidification, has harmonizing effects on off-balanced organ functions and activates healing forces. It helps the body to better compensate against environmental factors such as noise and air pollution, and poor quality water and food. Ginseng helps the body during conditions of physical, chemical and emotional stress to regain its metabolic equilibrium. The root is well known as an effective regenerative, enhancing mental activity and stimulating the neurovegetative control system of the brain — so accelerating learning.

In the cardiovascular field, ginseng can prove helpful against headaches and anaemia, heart and circulatory disorders, and the regulation of blood pressure. It cleanses the blood, prevents hardening of the arteries, fights tumours and is



effective against neural diseases, kidney trouble, diabetes, premature ageing and depression. Ginseng is well known as a harmonizing tonic, both during and after illness, before and after giving birth; it can be used effectively as a stimulant against loss of appetite, and last but not least, it can even act as a remedy for serious hangovers.

Active Substances

Red Korean Ginseng contains a number of valuable active substances including the following:

- minerals
- trace elements (B, Na, P, Fe, Al, Cu, Mn, Co, V)
- vitamins (A-complex, B1, B2, B12, C, folic acid)
- enzymes (amylase, phenolase)
- amino acids and peptides
- fatty acid derivatives (stearine, panaxsaeure)
- the ethereal oil panacea and alkaloids.

With selenium, germanium and maltol — essential elements for cleansing the blood — the root contains a high concentration of antioxidants.

The main active ingredients of Korean ginseng are ginsenosides (saponins and glycosides). These steroid-like phytochemicals have adaptogenic properties, which give ginseng its anti-stress properties. The glycosides act on the adrenal glands, helping to prevent adrenal hypertrophy and excess corticosteroid production in response to stress. Ginsenosides increase protein synthesis and stimulate neurotransmitters in the brain. Ginseng stimulates the formation of blood vessels and improves cranial blood circulation, thereby improving memory and cognitive abilities.

“The strength of ginseng lies in its ability to develop physical power and endurance and, at the same time, it inspires the ginseng-eater's performance of memory and the available intellect.”

Albert Einstein
(1933)



Saponins seem to reduce blood cholesterol levels, reduce the risk of cancer and stimulate our immune system. They bind with bile salts and cholesterol in the intestinal tract. Bile salts form small micelles with cholesterol, facilitating its absorption. Saponins cause a reduction of blood cholesterol by preventing its reabsorption. And, in addition, studies have shown that saponins can lower the risk of human cancers.

Korean ginseng also contains steroids, such as panaxtriol, which are remarkably similar in structure to anabolic steroids found naturally in the body. This makes Korean ginseng ideal for athletes and body builders looking for a natural alternative to anabolic steroids. Korean ginseng is also used by women for the treatment of post-menopausal symptoms.

Application

Take one or two slices of ginseng (1–2 mm thick) and allow them to melt in the mouth. This should be done on a daily basis, in the morning, and also before going to sleep if necessary. A depot of minerals, vitamins and ginsenosides will build up after about one week, with subtly perceptible results on the mind and body. In stressful situations, the slices may be 5–8 mm thick. There are no recorded examples of a ginseng overdose! In China, it is said that those who use ginseng regularly live healthy lives of 110 years or more. One root weighing about 30 grams is sufficient for one month's dosage.

According to the German dispensatory (DAB), 1–2 grams of ginseng is recommended as a daily dose, corresponding to 15–30 mg of ginsenosides. A number of standardized products is offered on the market whose spectrum of effective

substances is guaranteed by the respective manufacturer. To balance natural fluctuations within the active substances, roots of diverse quality are processed and mixed.

High Quality Roots

Korean ginseng is a deciduous perennial herb that reaches a height of 60–80 cm and, typically, has light-coloured fleshy roots. The leaves are dark green coloured and oval shaped. Each leaf comprises five leaflets; the three terminal leaflets are larger than the two lateral ones. The ginseng stem is erect and deep red in colour. Korean ginseng produces small red berries and grows on moist and shaded mountainsides in China, Korea, Alaska and Russia.

Domestically, the plant requires careful cultivation in treated soils under specific climatic conditions before it can be successfully harvested. The Koreans have mastered these conditions perfectly, thus holding an outstanding position in the history and development of ginseng. Of the many varieties of Panax, only the Korean variant enjoys worldwide popularity because of its high quality and medical characteristics. To conserve freshly harvested roots, they have to undergo a low-pressure water vapour process followed by a drying process at low temperatures (around 110 °F). The white roots turn red-orange and become hard and brittle. When kept in dry storage, they remain in excellent condition for an unlimited period of time.

In contrast to white ginseng (3–4 year old roots that are conserved by bleaching and air-drying), only red ginseng possesses the entire spectrum of ginsenosides and has a

higher concentration of active substances. It is not marketed freely, particularly as its cultivation, harvest, processing and selling is controlled in Korea by rigid state monopoly laws. Prices vary across the global consumer markets from \$100–1000 per root according to age, beauty and quality. Yet, even the Korean ginseng monopoly cannot meet the growing world demand for genuine, old ginseng roots.

The Science Bit

It has been difficult to verify the medicinal benefits of ginseng using modern science. Frequently, there are contradictory results from different studies. Supporters claim that this is due to the wide variety of ginseng quality used in studies. The quality and neutrality of studies from East Asia have also been questioned. Another issue is the profit potential of corporate research as ginseng cannot be patented. As a result, quality studies into the effects of ginseng are rare. Ironically, one of the better studies involving ginseng actually uses a proprietary formula of ginseng.¹ Ginseng is highly prized as an adaptogen. Unfortunately, this property is extremely difficult to prove scientifically as well. A comparative, randomized and double-blind government study does indicate it to be "a promising dietary supplement" when assessed for an increase in quality of life.² Panax ginseng appears to inhibit some characteristics associated with cancer in animal models; nevertheless, this effect is unclear in humans.³

References

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