

Medicinal & Herbal Products

The Fact Sheet Series are educational outreach materials intended to raise awareness of opportunities for SUSTAINABLE MANAGEMENT OF NON TIMBER FOREST PRODUCTS and their use in environmentally sound economic development.

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PRODUCING METHODS AND MARKETING

Medicinal and herbal raw materials are processed into final form [i.e. capsule, pill, cosmetic, tea, lotion, etc.] by industry and distributed throughout the world to health food stores, over-the-counter drug stores, and prescription drug pharmacies. Some products return to southwest Virginia in processed form and are sold in health food and drug stores throughout the area.

Value addition at the collector's level is highly limited due to lack of available resources and lack of market knowledge. Dealers usually require that collectors clean, dry, and sort medicinal and herbal products. Some dealers dry and sort them into bigger bales and sacks for sale to other buyers. Usually, local processing of medicinal and herbal products will violate the Pure Food and Cosmetic Act which prohibits the sale of patent or proprietary medicine. Even at the dealer level, value addition is limited due to strict quality and safety standards of the Food and Drug Administration and industrial buyers.

Often buyers will conduct chemical analysis on each bale of raw material and if the product fails to meet their standards or that of the Food and Drug Administration, the whole batch may be returned to the dealer.

NATURAL RESOURCE

Natural medicinal & herbal products involves the use of leaves, stems, roots, bark, seeds, fruit, flowers and buds to make teas, tonics, powder, snuff, poultices, salves, tinctures, lotions, and smoke inhalers.

Traditionally, these products formed the basis for medical care in rural southern Appalachia. With the advent of synthetic and manufactured medicines, natural healing fell out of common use but the knowledge of plant properties continues to be passed down through generations and many continue to gather for use in their home.

The most common economic use for these products in Southwest Virginia today is collection for sale to local dealers. The region supplies medicinal and herbal products in raw material form to cosmetic, pharmaceutical, health supplement and other industries throughout the United States and to many overseas based manufacturers. For many people in the region it supplies an important source of income.

Herbs and medicinal products are a very important part of modern medicine and health supplement industries. Plants provide treatments for such diseases as cancer, leukemia, heart disease, and pain relief for major trauma. Over 40 % of prescription drugs, or over \$15 billion in sales in 1997, contain at least one natural element. Also, the demand for natural health supplements is growing rapidly around the world.

However, industry, government, and individuals now recognize that the growing consumer interest jeopardizes these products' sustainability in the wild. In April of 1998, a coalition of scientists, conservation organizations, botanical gardens, and museums released the results of a twenty year global assessment of plants at risk which established a conservative estimate that 29% of the United States 16,000 plant species are at risk of extinction. Medicinal plants are at risk from over-harvesting and loss of habitat caused by urban development and suburban sprawl.



Medicinal and Herbal Plants which occur in southwest Virginia include:

- * Ginseng herb and root
- * Black cohosh root
- * Bloodroot
- * Blue Cohosh root
- * Catnip herb
- * Goldenseal herb and root
- * Lobelia herb
- * Mayapple
- * Pink Root
- Red clover blossoms
- Sassafras leaves, bark & root
- * Slippery elm bark
- Solomon seal root
- Star grub root
- Wild cherry bark
- Wild ginger root
- Wild hydrangea
- Witch hazel bark & leaves



** are on the United Plant Savers AT RISK list.



BLACK COHOSH

Black Cohosh (cimicifuga racemose) which is currently on the United Plant Savers AT RISK (of extinction) List, may be the next herbal craze. It is being collected as a source of the isoflavon phytoestrogen which is found in renewable sources such as soybeans and red clover.

A West Virginia dealer of wild plants states that he has an inventory based on a harvest that equates to 8 million plants a week and that his inventory is small compared to some other companies. This is obviously unsustainable.

Black Cohosh is fairly easy to grow and seems to thrive in a variety of environments. It appears to take two to four years to harvest.

Black Cohosh can be propagated from root crowns. The root tops (where the buds for the next stage of above ground growth are located) are buried in autumn under the soil surface. The pieces should be at least 2 inches long. If a crown is wide with a number of buds, the crown may be cut into two more pieces. Crowns have more time to reacclimate if planted well before freezing weather and mulched well. Watering them at first helps increase their chance of survival.

Of the species on the United Plant Savers AT RISK list, 83% are roots or rhizomes; so collection destroys not only the plants but thousands of seeds. All the At Risk species are perennials and data is scanty on how old a plant has to be before they display the characteristic for which they are harvested. Ginger must be 10 years old and ginseng needs 6 - 10 years to be worth harvesting. Long lived perennials cannot rebound quickly like annual or shorter lived plants.

The long term solution appears to be cultivation, but much remains to be done before sufficient supplies are available commercially.

CULTIVATION OPPORTUNITY

Several of the high value medicinal and herbal plants can be cultivated. Research plots on goldenseal and virtually wild ginseng indicate there is good opportunity for significant income to the region in cultivating these and other herbal and medicinal plants.

Seeds and plants can be purchased in the region. the opportunity exists for local people to produce and sell planting stock.

There are several publications available on cultivation and workshops are offered.

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Future endeavors may include field trips and workshops on marketing and cultivation methods. If you are interested in receiving updates or want to submit comments or inquiries on this sustainable development effort, contact:

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