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A \$20-million study will examine the health benefits of Ontario-grown ginseng

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Walk through a health-food store and it's not hard to find a product that includes ginseng among its ingredients.

The root has been credited as a remedy for health ailments such as diabetes, cold and flu, memory loss and attention deficit disorder. But does it really work?

That's the question a \$20-million, five-year scientific study will attempt to answer. Jointly funded by the provincial government, Ontario's ginseng industry and research institutions, the study will serve to differentiate Ontario ginseng from that grown in other parts of the world and identify the local root's health benefits.

Results of the study could allow researchers to improve the therapeutic properties of Ontario ginseng, the province's fifth-largest cash crop.

While ginseng has gained popularity as a natural health-care product during the past 20 to 30 years, not enough research has been done to give the root credibility as a treatment in mainstream medicine, said Edmund Lui, associate professor at the University of Western Ontario and president of the Canadian Institute of Chinese Medicinal Research. He will conduct research for the study.

"There is no consistent finding that it is a useful tonic," Lui said during a recent interview. "You need to have scientific research to show it has good qualities."

Lui said anecdotal evidence and isolated studies have shown the potential health benefits of ginseng, but there's not enough scientific evidence to prove it really works.

One issue researchers will face, he said, is that strains of Ontario ginseng differ from field to field, possess different genetic backgrounds and potentially different health benefits. It is hoped the research will lead to a breeding program that will produce different Ontario ginseng lines for specific medical purposes.

"Nobody's going to pay attention to you unless you've got clinical studies to back you up," said Denton Hoffman, general manager of the Ontario Ginseng Growers Association. "There is no question in my mind that the results from this aspect of the research project will increase consumer demand globally and add value to Ontario ginseng as a natural, daily addition to one's diet."

Even without clinical studies, local ginseng growers say their product fosters better health. Brant County grower Pat Van Acker has been taking ginseng for 15 years and says the root has health benefits.

"I use it on a daily basis," Van Acker said. "It helps fatigue and I don't get sick as much."

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Ontario growers hope the study's results will also give them a competitive edge as Chinese growers stake out a bigger share of the global ginseng market, and eventually allow for the certification and branding of Ontario ginseng.

Prices Ontario growers receive for North American ginseng have declined in recent years, as Chinese producers have started growing the North American variety of the root in Asia. Ontario growers say North American ginseng and Asian ginseng differ in chemical composition, offering different health benefits and tastes.

"What (the Chinese) are trying to do is blend the two (types) together and pass it off as North American root," Van Acker said. "The study will differentiate our root from the Chinese root."

Ontario growers claim the Asian version of North American ginseng is inferior to the locally grown variety and consumers need to know the difference. They fear an influx of Chinese-grown North American ginseng could ruin the market for genuine Ontario root. The Ontario Ginseng Growers Association says the province's growers produce a type of ginseng unique in the world, a variety that's existed here for thousands of years and was known to North American natives.

"I know Canadian ginseng is a better product," Van Acker said. "If the consumer is aware of what they're buying, then they can make a better purchase."

Ginseng is grown on a total of 6,400 acres of land in Ontario and about 85 per cent of the crop is sold in Asia. The province's 220 growers produce 85 per cent of ginseng grown in North America.

99 per cent

Hoffman said the new research study offers a unique opportunity to show Ontario ginseng as among the best in the world, from a scientific point of view. He said when ginseng is purchased at a retail location, buyers can't tell where the product was grown 99 per cent of the time.

"We want something that's distinct, something that can be identified as Ontario's," Hoffman said. "We're also trying to make a point that people want to know where their food comes from."

Brant County ginseng grower Ken Spriet, a past president of the Ontario Ginseng Growers Association, said proving the difference between Asian and North American ginseng will help Ontario growers. He called the scope of the new study unprecedented.

"It's critical to the survival of the Ontario industry," Spriet said. "Without this type of research to entrench the Ontario brand in the marketplace, we're done."

While Canadian growers have claimed their ginseng to be some of the best produced in the world, Lui said the new study could help prove or disprove that claim.

"They have no analysis done, so how can you say that?" Lui said. "Is it better? No one really knows."

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