

The View From HIGH FALLS GARDENS

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ORGANIC METHODS REVITALIZE GINSENG

As reported in the June 1995 edition of *ACRES USA*, *The Voice of Eco-Agriculture*, Wisconsin ginseng farmers are beginning to realize that chemical agriculture has debilitated the potency of cultivated ginseng and are turning to intensive organic farming methods to restore the tonic properties of the root.

As many HFG readers are already aware, wild American ginseng, *Panax quinquefolius*, has been harvested from our woodlands for at least three hundred years. Native Americans foraged for the root and sold it to the China trade.

Chinese herbalists have long valued American ginseng's properties as being complementary to the Asian variety. American ginseng is considered a Yin tonifier--cold, sweet and slightly bitter, with a Heart/Kidney/Lung organ system affinity. Asian ginseng, *Panax ginseng*, tonifies Qi, is also sweet and slightly bitter but its energetics are considered slightly warm, and has a Lung/Spleen affinity.

While American wild ginseng has become almost an endangered species from overharvesting and the clear-cutting of woodlands, the superior qualities of the wild root compared to the cultivated variety are reflected in their respective prices, about \$325 and \$25 per pound. The problems in ginseng cultivation are legion -- farmers cannot match the fertility of the forest floor ecosystem and the roots are highly susceptible to fungi and predators. The conventional response has been to use chemical fertilizers and fungicides but, as with all food crops, such practices have led to a further deterioration in the quality of the product. In the case of ginseng, one measure of quality is the percentage content of ginsenosides, believed (but not proved) to be the active ingredient.

Now, as reported by *ACRES*, a group of growers and environmental agronomists calling themselves the Wisconsin Ginseng Crop Improvement Project have decided to restore the quality of cultivated ginseng. Their methods include bioremediation of the soil and the use of organic fertilizers including foliar sprays. The idea is that healthier plants will be more resistant to fungus attacks.

Much is at stake -- in 1994 Wisconsin growers produced two million pounds of ginseng, over 90 percent of the nation's crop, most of which was sold to Asian traders.

'PHOENIX WHITE' BLOOMS IN PHILMONT

Two Chinese tree peonies made their debut in Philmont on May 18 by opening stunning, six-inch-wide white blossoms, single forms with large yellow and red stamens in the center. The plants arrived from China last October, were planted in the research plots of High Falls Gardens and weathered their first American winter (a strange, mild one) in a breeze.

The plants, the 'Phoenix White' cultivar of the wild woody species *Paeonia ostii*, were identified by Professor Hong Tao, a dendrologist (specialist in woody plants) with the Chinese Academy of Forestry in Beijing, as being the species used in the production of moutan or *mu dan pi*, the root bark of the tree peony which is used medicinally.

Paeonia suffruticosa is widely understood to be the Latin binomial for tree peonies, but Professor Hong believes that this term comprises a number of species. He has devoted a great deal of time to describing and differentiating them. *P. ostii* and three other species are described in his article published in the American Peony Society Bulletin, Number 282, in June of 1992.

The 'Phoenix Whites' were imported for HFG by David and Kasha Furman of Cricket Hill Garden in Thomaston, Connecticut. Cricket Hill is perhaps the only nursery in the U.S. devoted exclusively to Chinese, in contrast to Japanese, tree peonies. David explained that the Chinese, who have been cultivating tree peonies for at least a thousand years, prefer flower forms that Americans refer to as doubles, including bombs or "thousand petal" shapes, while the Japanese like the single or semi-double forms. Since most Americans' experience with tree peonies has been with Japanese cultivars, anyone making a visit to David and Kasha's annual Peony Festival held in mid-May in northwest Connecticut is in for a real treat. The plants are incredibly varied and exotic-looking. David and Kasha do a great job of describing the wide range of flower colors and shapes in their very attractive catalog, which may be obtained by writing Cricket Hill Garden, 670 Walnut Hill Road, Thomaston, CT 06787 or by phoning 203-283-1042.

IMPROVING YOUR DIET THE TRADITIONAL CHINESE WAY

Many people have discovered that the key to health is a diet centered around fresh, locally grown organic vegetables and herbs, supplemented by other high quality foods. Once we accept such an idea, however, one major problem remains -- how to do it. Changing a lifetime's worth of habits is hardly easy and, given the pressures of today's economy, the reality is that opportunities for proper home-cooked meals are scarce.

For practical suggestions on how to incorporate principles of healthy eating into daily life, we turned to three popular books on traditional Chinese nutrition, which include the use of herbs to correct imbalances in the body and prevent chronic degenerative disease. We're looking for ways to modify our current practices in the right direction, rather than attempting a draconian, comprehensive change that would most probably fail.

- Lu, Henry C., *Chinese System of Food Cures: Prevention and Remedies* (Sterling Publishing Co. Inc., 387 Park Avenue South, New York NY 10016, 1986), \$9.95.
- Ni, Maoshing and McNease, Cathy, *The Tao of Nutrition* (Sevenstar Communications Group, Inc., 1314 Second Street #208, Santa Monica, CA 90401, 1987), \$14.95.
- Flaws, Bob, *The Book of Jook: Chinese Medicinal Porridges* (Blue Poppy Press, 1775 Linden Avenue, Boulder CO 80304, 1995), \$16.95.

The three authors whose books we consulted (see above) are working in the classical Chinese tradition. Mr. Lu and Mr. Ni are both Taoists and their books are excellent general introductions to the concepts of traditional Chinese nutrition, but which also include many specific tips and recipes. Mr. Flaws is a Westerner who, with his wife Honora Wolfe, wrote a more general introduction to the subject in 1983, called *Prince Wen Hui's Cook: Chinese Dietary Therapy* (Paradigm Publications, Brookline, MA 02146). We're including his most recent book here because it specifically addresses one of the most challenging of our bad habits, that of the typical Western breakfast.

What the Chinese Know That Westerners Don't

Mr. Flaws cites the recent study conducted by Cornell and Oxford Universities in conjunction with the Chinese Academy of Preventive Medicine in Beijing, which found that 90% of the Chinese people studied still ate locally grown foods, had meat only about once per week, ate more calories per pound of body weight than Americans but are

much less obese, got 6-24% of their calories from fat compared to 39% for Americans and 45% for Britons, and whose cholesterol level averages only 127 mg per deciliter compared to an average of 212 in the U.S.

Mr. Lu compiles a sample menu of foods that yield complete nutrition according to the Western view, analyzes it according to both systems, and finds that it comes up short according to Chinese requirements. This we already know, that the Chinese system of medicine including nutrition, though highly unscientific from the Western point of view, recognizes factors necessary to health which are still unknown to science.

In his introduction, Mr. Lu points out that herbal cures for goiter, night blindness and beriberi were known in the 7th century A.D. Today Western medicine knows that iodine, Vitamin A, and Vitamin B-1 are the respective remedies for these diseases. However, those components are found in some, but not all, of the herbal remedies for those diseases, indicating that the Chinese approach is giving a fuller answer, albeit with unknown factors.

The Chinese Approach to Nutrition

As Mr. Ni quotes Confucius, "Eat not for the pleasure thou mayest find therein. Eat to increase thy strength. Eat to preserve the life thou has received from heaven." Confucius was something of a puritan, but we assume he was telling us not that we shouldn't enjoy food, merely that our choices must be well-founded. A gourmet, after all, appreciates variety. Traditional Chinese nutrition, Mr. Ni explains, taught people to choose foods according to the energies and properties of the food, the season of the year, method of preparation, geographic location, and natural principles of life and balance -- all of which can be learned. With practice, even Westerners who grew up eating Velveeta and Ring-Dings can learn to cure headaches and colds with food and to head off chronic degenerative disease. It's never too late for redemption!

All three books include discussions of the basic concepts of traditional Chinese nutrition. Mr. Ni does a very well-written summary in twenty pages. Mr. Lu creates a numerical scale of Yin and Yang, which for the more Cartesian readers may be good practice in evaluating all the factors such as season of the year, body type, etc. The basic idea is that foods are classified by flavors, energies, and direction of movement.

Foods are also listed with their specific actions (i.e., to relieve cough), along with handy little recipes and tips. For instance, in the *Chinese System of Food Cures* under Water Chestnuts, "Boil five water chestnuts in water with one fresh mandarin orange peel. Drink as a tea, three times daily, to relieve hypertension." And finally, there are lists of specific imbalances and maladies with a variety of appropriate food remedies underneath.