

VISUAL



Editor's Note: Using a blend of words and visuals, this series explores unique communities and reveals the heart of China through food, architecture, craftsmanship, landscapes and traditions.

FOUR MAIN STAGES IN ITS GROWTH PROCESS

SEED STAGE

Seeds are dispersed by wind, birds, or squirrels and may require several years to germinate, often failing under harsh conditions.

SEEDLING STAGE

During the early growth of ginseng (1-5 years), a single compound leaf with delicate leaflets emerges, known as "Sanhua".

At 5-10 years, ginseng develops a full five-leaf palmate compound leaf, known as the "palm".

GROWTH STAGE

After 10-20 years of growth, mature ginseng develops two palmate compound leaves, referred to as "Erjiazi".

MATURE STAGE

At over 30 years old, ginseng may develop 3 palmate leaves ("Dengtaizi") or 4 palmate leaves ("Sipiye"), exhibiting mature characteristics such as rounded rhizomes.

After 50 years, ginseng may develop five ("Wupiye") or six palmate leaves. The five-leaf "Wupiye" is exceptionally rare and highly valued in the market.

BEHIND THE CHANGBAI MOUNTAIN WILD-SIMULATED GINSENG

TREASURE FROM THE MOUNTAIN

Ancient ginseng tradition fuels modern industry in Northeast China, as **Zheng Jinran, Liu Mingtai** and **Tian Chi** report in Fusong, Jilin

Under the golden autumn sun of Changbai Mountain, 70-year-old Cui Chang'an, a fourth-generation *batou*, or ginseng master, kneels on a forest slope, gently brushing away the soil to reveal a ginseng root at least 30 years old.

"We never just dig ginseng," Cui said. "We lift it, and always leave the small ones, replant the seeds. That's how the mountain keeps giving."

From these ancestral forests, the legacy flows into Fusong county, known as China's hometown of ginseng. The county in Baishan city has over 460 years of documented cultivation history, while wild collection in the Changbai Mountain region dates back more than 1,500 years. The local tradition of entering the mountains to gather ginseng, called *Fangshan*, was listed as a national intangible cultural heritage in 2008.

About 45,000 people in Fusong work in the ginseng industry. The county manages 14,000 hectares of wild-simulated ginseng, producing nine metric tons with a value of 135 million yuan (\$18.9 million), official statistics showed.

Currently, ginseng is cultivated in two main ways: on flat land, like ordinary crops, known as garden ginseng; and under forest canopy, where seedlings grow naturally without human interference — known as wild-simulated ginseng, essentially equivalent to wild ginseng, a national first-class protected plant in China.

At the heart of Fusong lies Wanliang, home to the world's largest national-level ginseng market, where 80 percent of China's ginseng changes hands.

Products from this small town are exported widely, particularly to Japan, South Korea, and Southeast Asian countries, with exports like ginsenosides soaps exceeding 100,000 pieces annually, said Gang Dianyu, head of Wanliang Ginseng Hall.

"Even in our small exhibition hall, demand is huge. Visitors come from all over, and the variety of products never fails to impress," she said.

Fusong now produces five major categories of ginseng goods — food, health supplements, cosmetics, medicines, and bioproducts — totaling more than 600 varieties.

At the production level, Fusong County Natural Biotechnology Co, a provincial high-tech leader, showcases innovation rooted in tradition. Li Xinnan, its business development manager, said: "We're the only firm in China able to extract individual ginsenosides like RH2 and RG3. Most of our exports go to South Korea and Japan for health products and cosmetics. With rising global wellness awareness, demand for ginseng keeps growing every year."

Experts see a promising outlook. Wang Defu, honorary president of the Fusong Ginseng Culture Research Association, said: "Chinese ginseng still needs a stronger international brand and greater global recognition. But with growing government support and high-quality development policies, the industry is thriving again."

Initiatives from Jilin province as well as Baishan now focus on standardization, brand development, market expansion, and technology integration, forming a full industrial chain from seed to market. This ensures its position as a global ginseng hub.

For Cui Chang'an, policy and markets matter little when he kneels in the forest.

"I may never find the ginseng my grandfather planted," Cui said. "But someone will, and the mountains will keep giving."

Contact the writers at zhengjinran@chinadaily.com.cn

TYING THE STEM

The above-ground stem of the ginseng is wrapped with a red string to mark the plant.

Leaves are palmate compound leaves. The leaflets are elliptical with fine serrations on the edges.

Slope 20°

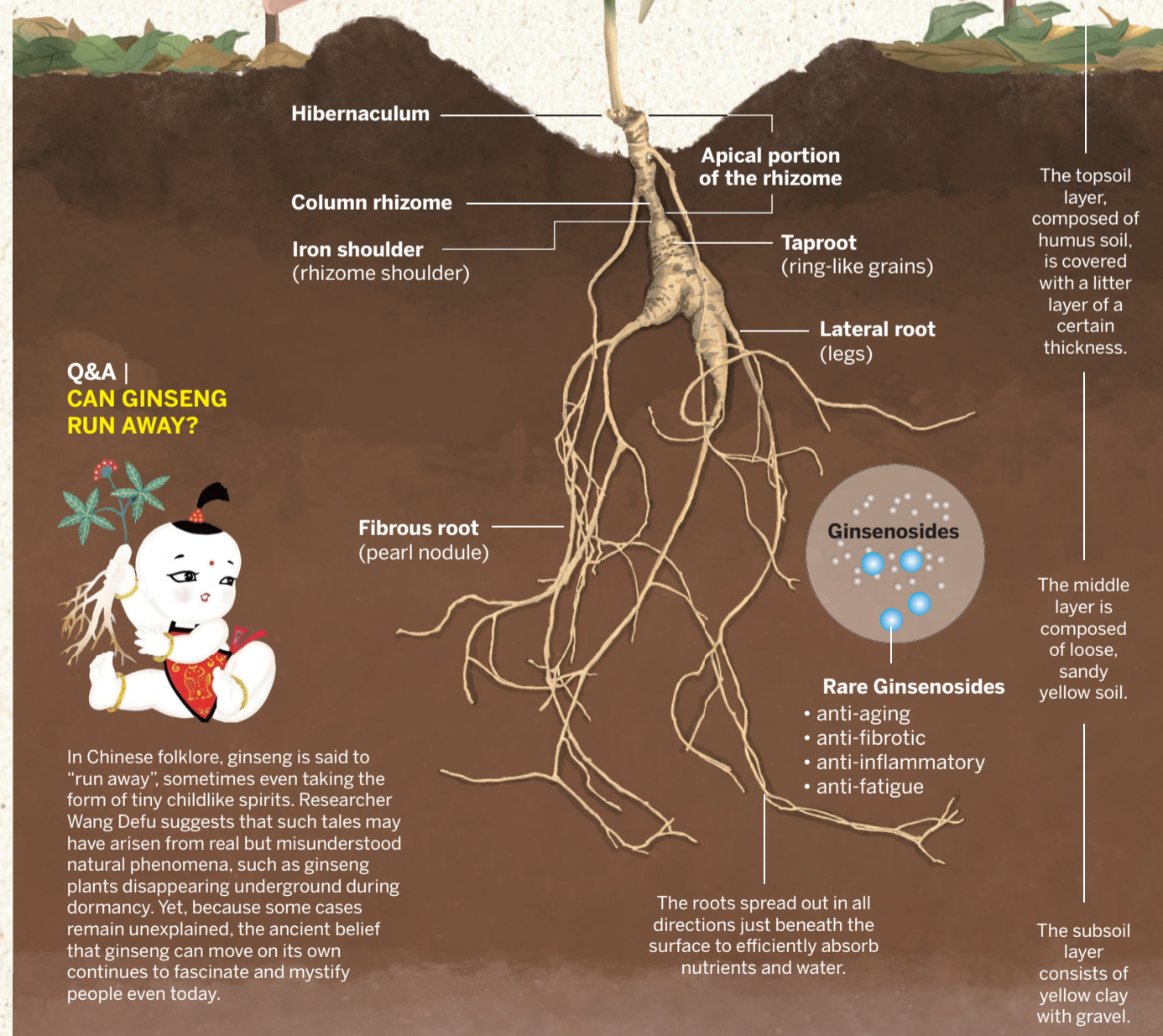
Ideal mountain slopes are up to 35 degrees, with about 20 degrees being optimal.

Temperature 15-25 °C

Ginseng stops growing or enters dormancy outside this optimal range.

Canopy closure 0.6-0.8

Ginseng grows best under partial shade in multi-layered forests, avoiding direct sunlight.



Q&A | CAN GINSENG RUN AWAY?



In Chinese folklore, ginseng is said to "run away", sometimes even taking the form of tiny childlike spirits. Researcher Wang Defu suggests that such tales may have arisen from real but misunderstood natural phenomena, such as ginseng plants disappearing underground during dormancy. Yet, because some cases remain unexplained, the ancient belief that ginseng can move on its own continues to fascinate and mystify people even today.

08 XIASHAN | Descending the Mountain

After the collection is complete, the team leaves the forest with the harvested ginseng.



07 DASHENBAO | Wrapping the Ginseng

The harvested ginseng is securely wrapped with moss, birch bark, or other protective materials.



Making a Sign: gatherers mark a symbol at the spot to commemorate the find and guide future seekers.

06 TAIBANGCHUI | Lifting the Ginseng

Using specialized tools, the ginseng is carefully dug out of the soil.



05 SUOBANGCHUI | Tying the Stem

The above-ground stem of the ginseng is wrapped with a red string to mark the plant.



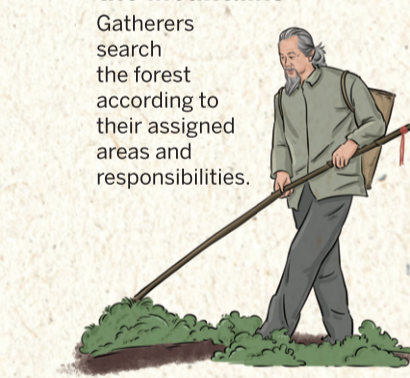
04 HANSHAN | Announcing a Find

When someone discovers ginseng, they loudly alert their companions, who respond in acknowledgment.



03 YASHAN | Searching the Mountains

Gatherers search the forest according to their assigned areas and responsibilities.



02 FANGSHAN | Entering the Mountains

The team goes into the forest to search for and harvest ginseng.



01 LABANG | Organizing the Team

Before entering the mountains, the team leader (Batou) organizes the ginseng-gathering group.

