

# Virtual Internship: American Ginseng Research

## About the Internship:

The Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage (CFCH) seeks virtual (non-resident) interns throughout the extended Appalachian region and the eastern Midwest to join a “virtual field school” project on the history, folklore, harvest, conservation, and use of American ginseng. Smithsonian experts will offer guidance in research methods and best practices. Research by interns will help inform a proposed program for the 2020 Smithsonian Folklife Festival in Washington, D.C.

Ginseng is a plant found in the forests of both the United States and parts of Asia. Its history has intertwined these two portions of the world since 1716, when North American ginseng was first traded to China. It has numerous health benefits, according to users in America and Asia, ranging from treatments for diabetes and cancer to impotence and fatigue. Because its root resembles the human body, there is widespread folklore around the plant, especially in Asia. In the United States, folk stories center on finding the largest root or group of plants, similar to hunting or fishing stories.

Due to its popularity and slow growth, plus development of former forest land and other environmental factors, wild ginseng has become increasingly scarce in its natural habitat. As the Wild Ginseng Conservation Institute of West Virginia University states, “ginseng has become an important model species – a sensitive indicator of the effects of contemporary global and regional environmental change for plants in the eastern deciduous forest.” Approximately ninety percent of ginseng exported from the United States is now grown on farms in Wisconsin, largely in Marathon County. These farms tend to be small and family-owned, and many are in their third or fourth generation, which has established another set of traditions.

The proposed program for the 2020 Smithsonian Folklife Festival will bring together ginseng “hunters,” farmers, dealers, conservationists, traditional medicine experts, and others with a deep knowledge and traditional ties to this widespread and fascinating plant, from both the Appalachian and Midwestern regions and appropriate areas of China and South Korea.

## Virtual Internship Activities and Goals:

This virtual internship aims to bring together a group of students interested in the intersections of history, folk medicine, traditions of the forest, family farming, international trade, and conservation of natural materials to do archival and field research on ginseng specific to their community/state/region, to compare and contrast information, and to learn from one another and from experts in the field.

Smithsonian staff will be available to provide instruction in best practices in oral history and folklife interviews and archival research methods. Interns will connect to a project supervisor and other experts in the field as appropriate, as well as to each other as a peer network, via email and a shared internet-based platform. Students will be expected to do community/state/regional archival, library and/or internet research as well as at least one field interview with an expert in any aspect of ginseng growing, harvest, conservation, trade, and/or use as a form of healing, specific to their local community/state/region.

**Learning Objectives:**

- Learn best practices in archival research and oral history and folklife field interview methods
- Put best practices to use by conducting archival and field research
- Compare and contrast community/state/regional information to get a clearer picture of historical and current ginseng harvest, cultivation, trading, conservation, and use as a medicinal herb
- Connect to a network of Smithsonian and other experts and peers to share information across the state and regional boundaries of those areas where ginseng is grown, harvested, and studied
- Learn more about the process of research and planning that is necessary for a successful and impactful Smithsonian exhibition or educational event such as a Smithsonian Folklife Festival program

**Terms:**

The internship period will begin on or around February 25 and will extend twelve weeks to May 10, 2019. Students should commit a minimum of ten hours per week. (Dates may be negotiated if the student needs a minimum number of hours/weeks for university credit, and number of hours per any given week can also be negotiated to accommodate student's schedules and needs.)

Students will be expected to produce a final paper or multimedia product summarizing and interpreting research findings, as well as provide copies of recorded interviews, photos, and field reports. The research will be housed in the Ralph Rinzler Folklife Archives and Collections at CFCH and will become an important planning tool for the 2020 Festival program. Selected students may be chosen to come to Washington, D.C. as paid presenters for the 2020 Festival.

NOTE: While the aim of the virtual field school is to form a network of students within the region where ginseng is grown, harvested, and studied, if a student at an institution in another part of the country has pertinent experience or strong interest in the subject, a case could be made for inclusion.

**The candidate who would most benefit from this experience will be:**

Undergraduate or graduate students (current or prospective) in folklife, oral history, cultural anthropology, or public history who wish to gain more research and field experience, or those in conservation biology, agriculture, forest management, economics, medicine, or other fields, who are interested in experience using qualitative methods from the humanities and social sciences to gather information useful to their training and future practice.

**Location:**

As a virtual internship, you are not expected to be in residence at the Smithsonian during the internship, but you may wish to visit a local/regional archive or library with archival holdings, and you will be expected to interview someone associated with some aspect of ginseng growing, harvest, conservation, or use which may require some local or regional travel.

**To Apply:**

Complete the online application through the Smithsonian Online Academic Appointment System (SOLAA). Visit [solaa.si.edu](http://solaa.si.edu) and create an account. After selecting Internship, specify the Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, and then choose "Virtual Internship: American Ginseng Research."

To be considered, please submit your materials by December 15, 2018. Applications received after this date will be considered on an as-needed basis. Interns will be selected and notified by January 15.

For more information, contact curator and project leader Betty Belanus at [belanusb@si.edu](mailto:belanusb@si.edu).