



Root from the home team

When you think of ginseng, that marvellous root whose health benefits have been known in Asia for centuries, it's a misnomer to think of Korea or China or Japan. Think Ontario.

While it may seem paradoxical, it's virtually a secret here at home that the province's 200-plus ginseng producers now lead the world in growing the best ginseng in terms of taste, quality and health benefits per milligram. About 85% of the four to six million pounds they raise each year is exported to Asia, says Denton Hoffman, general manager of the Ontario Ginseng Growers Association based in Simcoe.

But that is due to change. Researchers at St. Michael's Hospital in Toronto and at the University of Western Ontario's Ontario Ginseng Innovation and Research Centre (OGIRC) are looking at ways to use ginseng (*panax quinquefolius*) to create effective medications to address everything from diabetes to heart disease to dementia.

"There is something about the soil conditions, especially in southwestern Ontario, that creates absolutely top-quality ginseng," Mr. Hoffman says. "Our ginseng is now recognized as the best in the world, and we even export seeds to Asia.

"Now, lots of research [is] directed toward creating commercial applications to address a wide range of health problems. If successful, Ontario will have a booming global market."

One of the most promising applications is the use of ginseng in lowering blood sugars in both those with Type 2 diabetes and those in danger of developing the dis-

ease. Dr. Vlad Vuksan, a University of Toronto professor and clinical researcher at St. Michael's Hospital, has already shown in clinical trials that just three grams of ginseng taken with a meal can reduce blood glucose levels by between 20% and 30%.

Currently he is investigating ways to create a reliable commercial product – one that meets rigorous scientific tests and can be prescribed by endocrinologists as a reliable and effective supplement to other therapies. "Ontario actually leads the way in ginseng research," he says.

At the University of Western Ontario's OGIRC, Dr. Ed Lui is focused on more basic, pure scientific research. He wants to understand which varieties of ginseng contain disease-fighting properties and how they work on the human body. The final result will be specific varieties of ginseng grown to act as a supplement in treating diseases as broad-ranging as cancer, heart disease, metabolic disorders and diabetes.

Dr. Lui is currently looking at 12 ginseng farms across the province. Each appears to offer different phyto-chemical properties, he says. This diversity represents one of the great strengths of home-grown ginseng.

"The initial work will take at least four to five years," he says. "And while there will be lots of work getting there, the future offers a bright hope for the premium, healthy benefits that Ontario-grown ginseng can bring to the world."

**For more information, visit
www.growourfarms.ca**