

## Income Opportunities with Botanical Herbs: Planting the Seed.

By David Richert, *Virginia Dept. of Forestry*

Virginia Cooperative Extension and Virginia State University recently teamed up with the Virginia Department of Forestry and The University of Appalachia School of Pharmacy to host two day-long landowner workshops on income opportunities with botanical herbs. Researchers shared their combined experience of nearly a century with approximately 120 participants, including landowners, herbalists, foresters and Extension agents. American ginseng was a favorite topic, although the workshop covered a variety of botanical herbs, including: goldenseal, skullcap, valerian root, echinacea and California poppy. At the end of the workshops – thanks to a grant from the USDA Renewable Resources Extension Act (RREA) – participants were able to leave with a comprehensive textbook on how to grow ginseng, goldenseal and other botanical herbs.



Participants received a wealth of educational materials. Photo by: David Richert, VDOF.

For many forest landowners, the forest's primary economic value is found growing in the volume of standing timber. These revenues are periodically generated at timber harvest, often with significant capital inputs for cutting, skidding, loading and hauling the timber to the mill. For landowners with an interest in intensive management, there are additional income opportunities from botanical herbs. With a relatively short rotation and relatively small start-up capital, botanical herbs may be increasingly attractive as consumer demand for herbal medicine increases.

When considering growing botanical herbs for profit, careful planning is critical. Participants learned that certain herbs may have strict shade, moisture, nutrient or pH requirements that affect the success rate. (Both American ginseng and goldenseal seem to prefer slightly acidic sites that are rich in calcium). Planting is often the most challenging - seeds may need to be stratified or otherwise pre-treated, they may not germinate in the first year, or they may be eaten by rodents or birds. Collecting soil samples and/or establishing small sample plots with a few seeds are cost-effective methods of determining if you have a good site. Once established or nearing harvest, a variety of fungi, pests (including slugs, deer, and voles) can decimate a crop. Trespassers who illegally poach herbs can also reduce profitability.



Landowners watch a video on ginseng production. Photo by: David Richert, VDOF.

Participants also learned various marketing strategies, including USDA-certified organic labeling, to improve price and achieve greater stability in botanical herbs markets. Quality is a driver of profitability—trace amounts of heavy metals, or the concentrations of “bio-actives” (desirable biological compounds found in the herbs) may affect the marketability of some herbs. In the case of American ginseng, laws on trade in rare or diminishing species may also affect marketability. Regardless, good cooperation and communication among Extension agents, buyers and growers may help to increase the profitability, especially when growers can pool larger lots of their crops.

A landowner considering income opportunities with botanical herbs has a wealth of information available for review. Please visit the Virginia Cooperative Extension's Web site, or contact your local forester or extension agent for more information. David Richert is an RC&D Forester with the Virginia Department of Forestry [david.richert@dof.virginia.gov](mailto:david.richert@dof.virginia.gov)