

How to Steward Your Ginseng Population

What follows is a formal stewarding practice. However, the process need not be as detailed as this. The important steps for growing wild ginseng populations are Steps 6 and 7, which could be carried out without the detailed record keeping described in Steps 1-5. The steps are as follows:

1. Re-finding the population. Record the GPS location of a landmark in or near the population. Many smart phones now have GPS capability. Note however that GPS is less accurate under heavy tree canopies and in hilly terrain. A second approach is to create a 'phototrail'; a notebook containing sequential photos accompanied by bearings and distances leading to the population from some known starting point.
2. Once ginseng is found, perform broad 'sweeps' through the population in spring to delineate the population (post-germination; ca. May 15 – June 15). The approach involves walking in the center of 15 ft wide parallel transects through the woods, temporarily marking ginseng plants with flagging (Fig. 16.1). This procedure locates clusters of plants comprising a population.

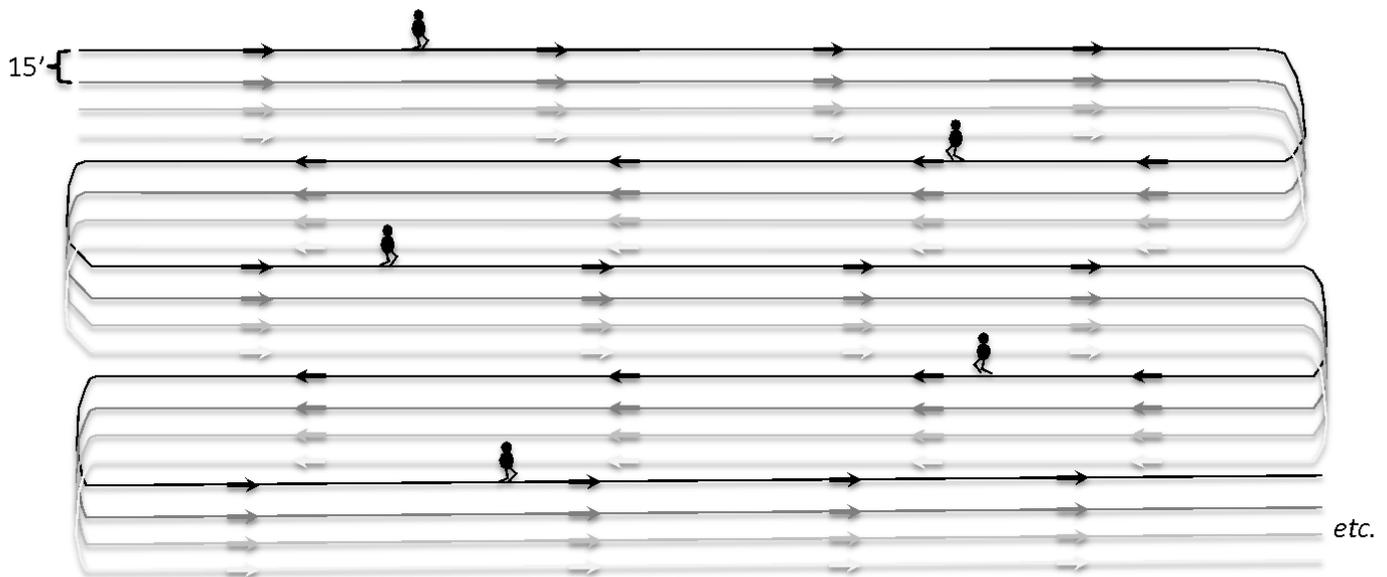


Fig. 16.1. Method of performing systematic sweeps across the forest to locate plants of an existing ginseng population. This particular sweep would use 4 people to walk the parallel transects, marking all discovered plants with flagging.

- Ginseng plants typically occur in 'clusters'; small groupings of 2 – 100 plants that occur within an area of a few square yards. Create a phototrail from each cluster to the next until all clusters are included, naming the clusters along the way (e.g., A, B, C, D, etc.).
- Produce rough maps of each cluster to aid in re-finding plants in the fall (Fig. 16.2). These maps do not need to be precise or carefully drawn, but should include elements that will aid in re-finding plants at a later date. Revisiting clusters in the fall and noting plants that have disappeared (e.g. due to browsing) can give an idea of the health of the population.

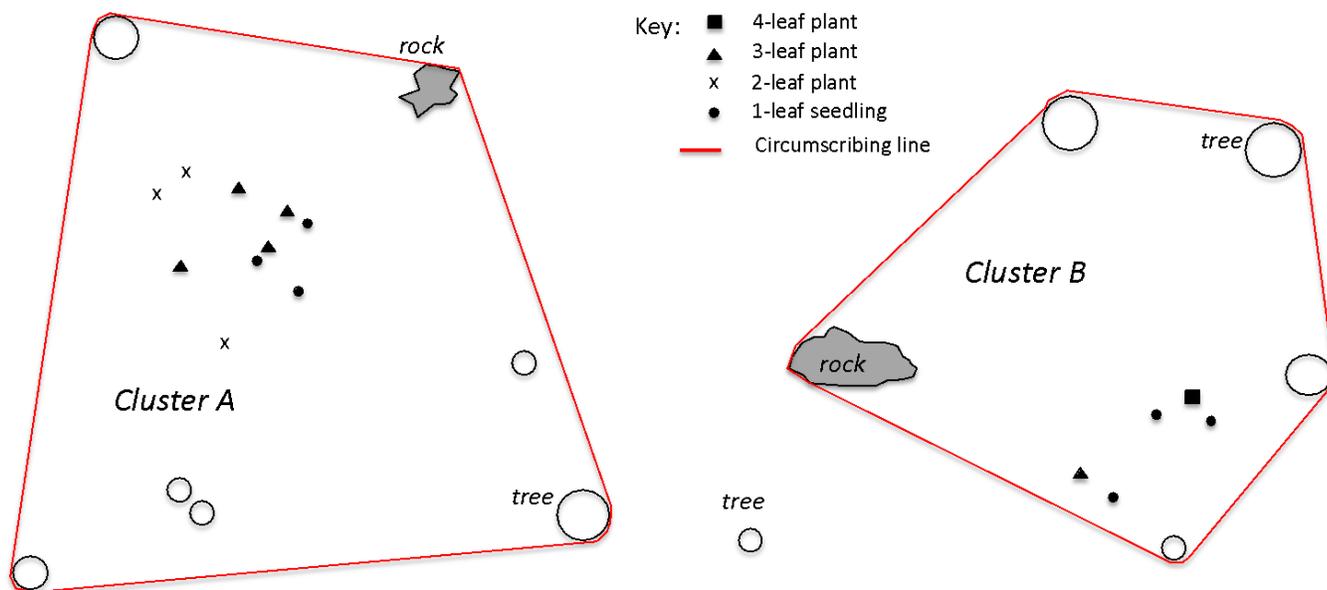


Fig. 16.2. Sample sketch map of ginseng clusters showing positions of individual plants relative to fixed object such as large trees or rocks. Note different designations for ginseng plants of different size. Maps should be dated. New plants can be added over time. Adding approximate distances from objects can help in future relocation.

- Gather basic data by cluster, including number of individuals in each leaf class to provide a baseline from which to judge effectiveness of stewarding in future years.

NOTE: If time is an issue, steps 1-5 could be executed in the fall, but a more complete census is possible in the spring before tops have been lost to various mid-season stresses.

6. Plant seeds. The ideal seed planting time is after the majority of fruits are ripe (bright red), but before harvest season begins. In many states this will be late August, though population variation in fruit ripening is common. If most berries are still green, seed planting will need to be delayed.

a. Seed depth; The optimal planting depth is ½” – 1” deep, depending on how loose the soil is. For firm soil, use ½”. For loose soil, 1”.

b. Plant berries? Or seeds removed from berries? A proper experiment has not been performed to test which is optimal, however both will work. I suggest if the berry has one seed, plant the whole berry. If the berry is 2-seeded or 3-seeded, remove the pulp and plant the seeds separately since only one seedling will likely succeed in a given location.

c. Location considerations.

(1) Plant seeds 1 – 3 ft away from the parent plant to ensure that diseases or pests associated with the parent do not infect the seedling.

(2) Avoid planting seeds near decaying logs where they may be more prone to fungal infection.

(3) Consider locations that naturally screen emerging plants from the reach of deer and the view of poachers.

(4) Heavily shaded microsites such as under spicebush may be suboptimal.

7. Clip tops. After seeds have been planted, carefully clip the stalk of large two prong plants plus all three or four prong plants below the leaves. I recommend scissors for this task, not simply tugging on the stalk. Pulling on the stalk can break the underground rhizome and damage the plant. Since photosynthesis and re-stocking the root with carbohydrates is virtually complete by the end of August, clipping will not harm the plant. However this is effective at hiding the most valuable adult plants from possible harvesters. Stalks should be discarded far from the population to avoid detection. [NOTE: Some medicinal uses have been found for fresh leaf material]

Repeat steps 6 and 7 annually to ‘grow’ the natural population over time. Repeating the spring census after a few years can help gauge the success of stewarding.