

## Medicinal Plant Growers Show Samples of U.S.-Grown Chinese Herbs

Jean Giblette | DIGITAL EXCLUSIVE

Small bags of *jie geng*, *gou qi zi*, *ze lan*, *huang bai* and a few dozen other dried samples of Chinese medicinal herbs have been eliciting oohs and ahhs from practitioners this autumn. The material tends to be more brightly colored and aromatic than the usual herbal dispensary product. That's because it was harvested in September and October at many small farms around the United States, to be presented directly to herbal practitioners.

This year, five medicinal plant grower associations in California, Minnesota, New Mexico, New York, and West Virginia, with a membership of more than 90 small ecological farms, have been conducting a feasibility study of direct-marketing Chinese medicinal herbs. Their expenses for the study have been matched by \$148,000 from the USDA's Value-Added Producer Grant program.

Medicinal plant growers have known for several years that producing for Oriental medicine practitioners is a complex task, with high knowledge barriers, which is unlikely to be undertaken by any one farm or association working alone. They are cooperating to explore this complex market, which is seen as a new opportunity. The unique value of the Asian traditions to herbal medicine is substantial, being based on millennia of documented empirical research (in Chinese medicine) and a vast body of scholarship on plant qualities and formulations. The well-trained, certified and licensed practitioners in the U.S. are seen as providing a higher level of coherency to the market for medicinal herbs.

The farms are represented by association members working together in a national steering committee known as the Medicinal Herb Consortium. The Consortium has met through teleconferencing since 2001. In 2003, the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation provided a grant to support its work in recognition of the importance of ecological cultivation to conservation. As many farms within the Consortium have demonstrated, hundreds of Asian medicinal plants can be cultivated in North America. Plant species have been screened for invasiveness and other undesirable characteristics through trial plantings and prior research.

Most of the world's medicinal plants are currently harvested from the wild. People tend to perceive wild plants as more potent than cultivated plants. However, ecologically conscious farmers have demonstrated that certain value-added methods of cultivation - which incorporate certified organic methods and a close imitation of nature, including highly biodiverse production systems and matching of plant species to preferred habitat - produce plants of a quality comparable to that of the wild.

Entry barriers to production have more to do with economics. There is no way for North American farmers to compete with imported products on price alone. The farms must find and connect with that segment of the market willing to pay more to support ecological values, local agriculture, freshness and quality. This is the same challenge met by farmers selling local produce through farm stands, green markets, Internet marketing and other direct connections.

Market studies completed by Consortium members in the past few years have identified acupuncture and Oriental medicine practitioners as the most quality-conscious market segment. In some respects, herbal practitioners resemble restaurant chefs, who know their results depend absolutely on the highest quality ingredients. The profession of acupuncture and Oriental medicine will determine standards of acceptability in domestically grown herbs, including the use of native plant species as substitutes for traditional medicinals.

At present, direct connections between farms and practitioners are being forged through special mediums such as the Sonoma County Herb Exchange (SCHA) in California. For example, a small farm in Petaluma produces several dozen different varieties of Asian medicinals, most sold through the exchange. (For more information, visit [www.sonomaherbs.org](http://www.sonomaherbs.org).) On the other side of the country, a group of certified organic farms in New York established production trial plots during the summer of 2003, and is moving toward test production of about 40 species.

The Consortium has tried to reach out to the AOM practitioner community in as many ways as possible throughout the year, with phone interviews, some surveys, also presentations at conferences and field workshops. Primary objectives are to build relationships; to enlist the support of practitioners in evaluating samples and determining product mix; and to settle on a distribution system that will work in each locality. Farmer-practitioner events have been scheduled in all five states, with the herb samples on display this autumn.

These medicinal plant growers are showing that cooperative research can solve problems that at first may seem insurmountable. The project is an opportunity for farmers and herbal practitioners to help assure a clean, high-quality, sustainable supply of medicinal plants for the future of traditional Oriental medicine in this part of the world.