

# The Ginseng Commons of West Virginia

Folklife and landscape in southern West Virginia

By [David Bollier](#)



Tending the Commons: Folklife and Landscape in Southern West Virginia. American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

Sometimes it's easiest to see a commons when it exists in a bounded geographic space that incubates a distinctive culture and set of social practices. That can certainly be said about the mountainous areas of southern West Virginia, where people's interactions with the landscape have bred communities whose lives revolve around their interactions with the landscape.

[Tending the Commons: Folklife and Landscape in Southern West Virginia](#) is an impressive collection of essays and hundreds of sound recordings, photographs and manuscripts documenting traditional uses of the mountains in the Big Coal River Valley of southern West Virginia. The materials — from the American Folklife Center's Coal River Folklife Project — are a wonderful tour of all sorts of commons in that region. (A tip o' the hat to Michael and Carrie Kline, of [Talking Across the Lines: Worldwide Conversations LLC](#), for alerting me to this remarkable collection of materials.)

Over generations, the people of West Virginia have forged their own distinctive commons in the forests there, which are the world's oldest and biologically richest temperate zone hardwood system, according to ecologists. The region hosts all sorts of distinctive plants and animals, which in turn has shaped how people live. For example, people in southern West Virginia are familiar with harvesting greens in the spring, berries and fish in the summer, and roots, nuts and wild game in the fall. The *Tending the Commons* website also documents storytelling traditions, baptisms in the river, cemetery customs, and the spring "ramp" feasts based on native wild leek.

I was fascinated by the discussion of [ginseng as a commons](#). Ginseng is big in the Coal River area because it is one of the few places in the U.S. where the root grows wild in significant quantities. The wild ginseng of West Virginia is considered a real prize because it has higher concentrations of ginsenosides — the substance that both stimulates and soothes — whereas “tame” ginseng, which constitutes some 90% of U.S.-grown ginseng, has much lower concentrations.

Not surprisingly, there are lots of “diggers” who know the special uses of ginseng and where to find it. Wild ginseng can command as much as \$450 per pound compared to \$30 for domesticated versions. But ginseng is not just a “market.” It is a commons — because a regional culture has grown up around it. A wonderful essay on the “Tending the Commons” website writes:

*A linchpin in the seasonal round of foraging, ginsenging is....essential to a way of life. “I’d rather ginseng than eat,” said Dennis Dickens, eighty-five, of Peach Tree Creek. “Every spare minute I had was spent a-ginsenging.”*

*“If you can’t go ginsenging,” said Carla Pettry, thirty, of Horse Creek, “it totally drives you crazy.”*

*“The most prolific spreads of wild ginseng,” writes Val Hardacre, in Woodland Nuggets of Gold, “were found in the region touched by the Allegheny Plateau and the secluded coves of the Cumberland Plateau.” Through centuries of interaction with this valuable and elusive plant, residents of the plateaus have created a rich and elaborate culture, a culture of the commons.*

*Tending the Commons* helps highlight the real meaning of the commons — our ongoing interaction with the local resources that we depend upon and come to love, and the shared culture that sustains us as we common with each other.

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