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Monthly Chinese Materia Medica Highlights

Asian ginseng (*Panax ginseng*, Araliaceae, 人參, left) and
American ginseng (*Panax quinquefolius*, Araliaceae, 西洋參, right)



The dried root and rhizome of both plants are the most esteemed Chinese medicinals. Asian ginseng has been used medicinally since the Eastern Han Dynasty (25~220). It powerfully tonifies vital *qi* and the *qi* of all the organs, engenders fluids, stops thirst, calms the spirit, and benefits the mind. American ginseng has been incorporated into Chinese *materia medica* since the Qing Dynasty (1644~1911). Cool in property, it tonifies *qi*, nourishes *yin*, clears heat, and engenders fluids. American ginseng has been serving as a perfect substitute whenever the warmth of Asian ginseng is not applicable according to syndrome differentiation in traditional Chinese medicine.

Although these two plants are different in appearance (the stalk of inflorescence of Asian ginseng is obviously longer), they share a same common name of “ginseng” in commerce. C A Meyer (1795~1855, Russian botanist) and C Linnaeus (1707~1778, Swedish botanist) got rid of the confusion taxonomically by establishing the scientific identity of Asian ginseng (*Panax ginseng*) in 1842 and that of American ginseng (*Panax quinquefolius*) in 1753, respectively.

人參

天高地迥野茫茫
本草千年源远流长
邀月约星晨饮露
坐看天下谁为王

西洋參

山中草本在西洋
静水深流性却凉
与海相隔遥万里
风帆两处正行航

The above photographs, texts and poems are contributed by Prof **Hubiao Chen** (Hong Kong), Dr **Ping Guo** (Hong Kong) and Prof **Jiqing Liu** (Shenzhen), respectively. We thank Prof **Zhongzhen Zhao** (Hong Kong) for advising this column and thank Dr **Qihe Xu** (London) for help with editing.