Codonopsis pilosula **(Franch.) Nannf.**

Campanulaceae
Source of: dǎng shēn 党参
bonnet bellflower root

Summary Description

Known as "poor man's ginseng," this carrot-like root is similar to Asian (but not American) ginseng in its acknowledged medicinal properties. The plant is widely cultivated throughout China and northeastern Asia, with many local variants and alternates; *C. pilosula* has three subspecies. In Korean cuisine a closely related Codonopsis root is prized as a salad vegetable. A twining, climbing, herbaceous, shade-tolerant perennial bellflower, hardy to Zone 4, the plant prefers cool, moist, "mountain" conditions. Each year climbing to 10-12 feet in height, the vines should being trained to a trellis, tripod or fence. The leaves can be smooth or slightly hairy depending on the species or subspecies. The pale yellow-green flower has purplish spots inside. The foliage and root have a distinct aroma that some find pleasant while others smell burning rubber, but the root should taste slightly sweet.

Propagation

Will self-sow near the mother plants under the right conditions, although older seedlings do not transplant well. Plentiful seeds ripen in late autumn; harvest when capsules are dried brown and feel papery. Sow the tiny seeds very thinly into a 72-cell tray, barely cover with potting medium and press seeds into the soil. Use bottom heat and keep moist. Germination should occur in 14-21 days, after which cooler temperatures and bright indirect light will promote root growth. Thin to one plant per cell. Seedlings should be robust with a strong root system before planting out.

Cultivation

Plant at a radius of 12-18 inches in a high canopy setting, forest edge or in part shade to 75%. Soil should be cool, moist, deep, and friable. Mulch well with forest leaves, needles or bark. Train to a strong support system, which may be removed at the end of the season.

Harvest & Processing

Fleshy white roots at least three years old are washed and cut into decoction-sized pieces, then dried at temperatures below 110°F. Make sure that the pieces dry evenly without retaining moisture in the centers. Pieces can be sifted and graded according to size to present a uniform product.

References

Flora of China: http://www.efloras.org/florataxon.aspx?flora_id=2&taxon_id=200022921
Bensky *Materia Medica* page: 714

Alternate species

C. pilosula var. modesta, C. tangshen, tubulosa, subglobosa, canescens, clematidea, nervosa, subcaposa, viridiflora, cardiophylla, bulleyana. C. lanceolata is listed as an adulterant.

Photo: Regina Serkin