

Dwarf Ginseng (*Panax trifolius*)

Identification:

Dwarf Ginseng is a tiny spring ephemeral found in rich woods across eastern North America. It generally has three leaves divided into three leaflets. Its much larger cousin, ginseng, has leaflets of five. The flower of Dwarf Ginseng is very delicate with 5 tiny petals and longer pistils protruding beyond the floral disk. A cluster of these tiny blossoms form a tiny ball of flowers arising from the point at which the leaflets meet. Unlike the true ginseng whose flowers are hidden beneath the much larger leaves.



Natural History:



The tiny dwarf ginseng is often overlooked by casual walkers during the spring wildflower season. But the plant is not making its display for us. The white petals are tiny and the plant low to the ground which just happens to be perfect for the organism the plant is truly interested in, gnats. The early spring insects busily fly from plant to plant looking for a bit of nectar or pollen to secure enough energy for their breeding season. This process as we know also allows for plants to cross-

pollinate and start their own new generations. Like dwarf ginseng, many spring ephemerals are perennials. There is just too much that can go wrong during the spring to rely on insect pollination and seed production in any single year. If you store energy in an underground root, like dwarf ginseng does, you can get another year even if a late frost kills off the pollinators, or a late snow destroys your delicate flowers, or even if some person walking by plucks you to give to their spring sweetheart.

Conservation:

True Ginseng (*Panax quinquefolius*) is prized as a medicinal herb. The genus *panax* means literally “cure-all” Because of its supposed medicinal uses, the true ginseng is being over harvested throughout its range. Dwarf Ginseng has no real medicinal use and so it does not suffer the same pressures as its cousin. The supposed disparity of medicinal value between these two plants is based on the shape of their roots. In traditional Chinese medicine, the more a ginseng root looks like a person, the more potent the root’s medicine. While true ginseng’s roots are long and gnarly with branches that do sometimes look like legs, dwarf ginseng’s roots are small and round, they appear nothing like a human being and so have no medicinal value.

