

From the Corners of the World: Geographical Branding: Botanicals

Regional movements can help communities retain the knowledge and value of their natural resources.

By Paul Altaffer & Grant Washington-Smith

In the final chapter of our series on regional branding, the focus will shift to some examples where regional branding has helped promote a natural product and some where this practice, if properly developed, might help enhance a product's image and consumer's awareness. Additionally, this column will also look at how regional branding programs might affect quality, sustainability and the customs surrounding the use and development of natural products.

As more consumers employ botanicals as complementary or alternative care—or even add them to their lifestyles—greater awareness is developing around these plant products. However, very little is known about these herbs, or where they come from. Many of them also quickly become commodities, which can result in overharvesting of rare plants or lower quality standards around their production. Regional branding may serve as a means of changing this tide. It is time to take a look at a few of the many other herbs and how regional branding may support sustainable development of these valuable resources.

Ginseng: the King of Herbs

The family of herbs known as “ginseng” is probably the most recognized botanical product in the industry. Consumers everywhere associate the use of ginseng with Asian culture and the promise of great health and longevity. While there are many plants that are called or associated with “ginseng,” there are only a few species of “true” ginseng: Asian ginseng (*Panax ginseng*) Japanese ginseng (*Panax japonicas*), Tienchi ginseng (*Panax notoginseng*) and American ginseng (*Panax quinquefolius*). Most people do not realize that some of the finest ginseng in the world actually comes from North America. American ginseng has a long tradition of use and trade in North America that dates back to the settlers and early trade to Asia. It is still one of the most valuable agricultural commodities sold from the U.S., especially into Asia. Most wild American ginseng grows in eastern North America in the Appalachian or Ozark mountains, while most of the cultivated ginseng is grown in places like Wisconsin and Ontario. Between wild and cultivated ginseng, there is great potential for developing regional branding. In TCM (Traditional Chinese Medicine) different trade names are used to differentiate wild and cultivated ginseng among other differentiating designations. For example, cultivated Asian ginseng root is known as “Yuanshen,” meaning garden ginseng, while wild harvested Asian ginseng root is known as “Shanshen.” Sun-dried or bake-dried Yuanshen is known as “Shengshaishen” (sun-dried garden ginseng) while sun-dried wild harvested Asian ginseng is known as “Shengshaishanshen.” The washed, steamed and dried Asian ginseng root is known as “Hongshen” (red ginseng). Cultivated American ginseng is known as “Xiyangshen” and Tienchi ginseng is known as “Sanqi.”

One of the best examples of successful regional branding involves the Wisconsin Ginseng Board (www.ginsengboard.com, or their sales arm, www.ginsengherbco-op.com). Established in 1986, the board represents the interests of more than 200 Wisconsin ginseng growers. It has established quality and pesticide standards and promotes the concept of regional identification.

By defining quality standards as well as standards for purity, acceptable levels of pesticides and fungicides, the Wisconsin seal is now broadly recognized in Asia as a symbol of great quality in ginseng products. The Wisconsin Ginseng Board has worked with state agricultural agencies and the USDA to design and implement these quality standards. In fact, the board's website offers pages in Chinese and Japanese to speak with customers and consumers in Asia.

Similarly, Wisconsin growers worked together with the USDA to include ginseng in the COOL (Country of Origin Labeling) program. This program is to compel companies—especially food manufacturers—to label the country of origin on a basket of agricultural commodities such as meats, seafood and fresh produce. Ginseng is the only herbal product on the COOL list.

Steve Rose, a career “ginsengologist,” has spent years promoting the regional properties of Catskill Mountain Wild American Ginseng, and it may in fact be the most valuable ginseng—or plant product for that matter—in the world. He has worked to educate American consumers about the tradition and benefits of American ginseng—a story that resonates deeply in Asia, where 95% or more of the annual harvest (or collection) may go. Americans, however, have not tuned in to this story and consume very little of the treasure it produces. The regional branding story, even that of the Wisconsin Ginseng Board, has unfortunately not yet been embraced by American consumers.

Devil's Claw

Devil's Claw (*Harpagophytum procumbens*), an herb found in the desert regions of south and southeast Africa, offers a valuable story in sustainability and regional branding. The root of this plant, which is used commonly as an anti-inflammatory and analgesic, nearly became extinct in the wild due to demand and overharvesting. This would have been a tragedy, as nearly 10,000 mostly poor families, especially in Namibia where most Devil's Claw grows, earn a living or supplement their living harvesting Devil's Claw. The economic significance of the plant cannot be overstated, and as a result, the establishment of regional trade alliances or groups, with or without governmental assistance, is important for the development of sustainable harvesting and management practices, quality control and regional marketing programs. Consumers of the extracts of Devil's Claw need to be made aware of the environmental, social and economic impact of the plant on the lives of natives and how little value is retained in the producing regions. Establishing regional programs will raise awareness of the region and hopefully enhance sustainable practices, improving quality and economic standards.

Microalgae

Microalgae like spirulina (*Arthrospira platensis* and *A. maxima*), chlorella (*Chlorella vulgaris* or *C. regularis*) and blue green algae (Cyanobacteria) offer several opportunities for regional branding. Spirulina and chlorella are typically cultivated on tropical island paradises like Hainan Island, off the southern coast of China and Hawaii. The producing regions have distinct climatic and environmental characteristics, which make them ripe for regional branding. Some producers and processors have also established special quality standards that define the product, including rules around the use of fertilizers. Additionally, some producers also offer organic and fair-trade products, both of which enhance the sense of quality and regional identity. The combination of characteristics should allow marketers to tap into the regional branding potential of their products.

Stevia

With the recent GRAS (Generally Recognized as Safe) status of stevia (*Stevia rebaudiana*), this plant is primed for explosive growth as a sweetener in the U.S., and soon Europe. With all the buzz around this herb, few people are also aware that the plant is native to South America (Paraguay, Brazil and Argentina). Yet, the truth is that the overwhelming majority of stevia is produced today in China and increasing also in India. Early attempts for regional branding or at least identification were lost to an indifferent market and to least-cost manufacturing in China. The question in the case of stevia is whether there still is the potential for regional branding of this plant or if the purified result of the plant extract (the family of chemical compounds known as steviosides) has become so commoditized that regional identification is pointless.

Grass Roots Development

If regional branding projects are to work, developers and marketers will need to establish the importance for these projects. The need for grass roots movements to protect the identity, quality and value of these products will be most important. Fair trade movements, for example, can help regional producers establish quality, economic, social and environmental programs that can help lift the region's status. Josef Brinckmann, vice president of research and development at Traditional Medicinals, and promoter of sustainable and traditional botanical programs worldwide, is a strong proponent of the idea of regional branding. He believes the cultural, medicinal and traditional use of plants is deeply associated with the regions in which they grow natively. Knowledge about the use of plants is also associated with native regions. Separating the plant from where it belongs severs an important link between knowledge and use. By setting up regional movements to collaborate in defining their plant resources, and possibly creating branding or identifying projects, communities can help retain the knowledge and even value of their natural resources.

Unfortunately, most botanical products have failed to realize their marketing potential. The good news is that this also means there is tremendous, untapped potential for the development of such regional branding projects and

consumer awareness.



Copyright © 2010 Rodman Publishing. All Rights Reserved. All rights reserved. Use of this constitutes acceptance of our [Privacy Policy](#)

The material on this site may not be reproduced, distributed, transmitted, or otherwise used, except with the prior written permission of Rodman Publishing.