

# ***Panax sp.* in Tuyen Quang, North Vietnam – A Potential Plant for Poverty Reduction**

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## **Author's contributions**

This work was carried out in collaboration among all authors. Author TNB, PQT, HTS, NTHA, BTT, NTS, NQH, and NTVA conducted data collection and analysis. Author TVD wrote the first draft of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

## ABSTRACT

Ginsengs are perennial forest herbs, belonging to genus *Panax* L. A species of ginseng was found in Tuyen Quang province, North Vietnam and named as *Panax sp.* – Tuyen Quang ginseng. Understanding the ecology, morphology, and saponin of Tuyen Quang ginseng becomes important for development, which can contribute to poverty reduction in the province. Field survey was conducted for ecology and samples were collected for morphology description, anatomy, and saponin analysis. The results indicated Tuyen Quang ginseng distributed in evergreen broadleaved forests in elevation of 980-1,200 m above sea level. It grows in forests with canopy cover of >50% and low vegetation cover of >80%. The soil is acidic with pH of 4.5-5. Morphology indicated some differences of Tuyen Quang ginseng with other described ginsengs in Vietnam. Saponin content of Tuyen Quang ginseng was 13.7%, which is much higher than that of *Panax stipulealatus* (7.1%) and *Panax bipinnatifidus* (7.5%), two widely planted and marketed ginsengs in Vietnam. In addition, current price of Tuyen Quang ginseng is up to 2,600 US\$/1 kg. It is concluded that Tuyen Quang ginseng could be considered as a potential forest herb for poverty reduction. However, study on growing techniques should be conducted before practical application.

*Keywords: Ethnic community; Panax sp.; poverty reduction; saponin; Tuyen Quang.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The genus *Panax* L. belonging to family Araliaceae is called ginseng. Until recently, 19 *Panax* species and subspecies have been described worldwide, most of them grow in eastern Asia [1]. Ginsengs have been widely used as traditional medicines [2-3]. The ginsenosides (triterpene glycosides) are the main biologically-active compounds of *Panax* L, which was first found 50 years ago. Until recently, more than 150 different ginsenosides have been isolated from different *Panax* species [4-5].

In Vietnam the first ginseng was found in 1973 and named as *Panax vietnamensis* Ha et Grushv. [6]. In 2003, a subspecies of *P. vietnamensis* was described and named as *P. vietnamensis* var *fuscidicus* K. Komatsu, S. Zhu & S.Q. Cai. This subspecies has natural distribution in south part of Yunnan province, China and Laichau province, North Vietnam [7-8]. Until recently, three ginseng species (*P. vietnamensis* Ha et Grushv, *P. stipulealatus* Tsai & K.m. Feng, and *P. bipinnatifidus* Seem.) and two subspecies (*P. vietnamensis* var *fuscidicus* and *P. vietnamensis* var. *langbianensis*) have been found in Vietnam.

Tuyen Quang province is located in North Vietnam with diversity of vegetation types, topography, and climate conditions. A ginseng (*Panax* sp.) was found to have natural distribution in narrow areas of Lam Binh and Na Hang districts of Tuyen Quang province, so called “Tuyen Quang ginseng”. It has been harvested from nature for health improvement and marketing to generate income for local ethnic communities for decades. The objectives of this study were (1) to describe ecological and morphological characteristics and (2) to analyze roots for saponin content of Tuyen Quang ginseng, which could be used to develop and manage this economically valuable ginseng sustainably.

## 2. RESEARCH SITES AND METHOD

### 2.1 Research Sites

By interviewing local authorities and ethnic people, it was reported that Tuyen Quang ginseng has natural distribution in Sinh Long commune, Na Hang district and Thuong Lam commune, Lam Binh district of Tuyen Quang province (Fig. 1). Therefore, those two communes were selected for field survey. The climate conditions including annual

precipitation, air humidity, and temperature were collected for each of two study sites/communes.

## 2.2 Methods

### 2.2.1 Natural and Ecological Characteristics

By interviewing local people, who have found and harvested Tuyen Quang ginseng, the areas of natural distribution became known. With their field guidance, it was easy for the survey team to get the desired survey locations. In the field, if plant of Tuyen Quang ginseng was found, natural and ecological characteristics were described including forest type, height of forest canopy, vertical structure of forest canopy, forest canopy cover, and low vegetation layer. Height of forest canopy was measured by Vertex. Vertical structure of forest canopy was identified through observing. Name of canopy trees and plants in low vegetation layer were identified in the field, and specimens were taken for species identification in Lab by taxonomists for field unknown species. The elevation above sea level was measured by portable GPS. In addition, a soil pit of 1.2 m depth and 60 cm width was dug up for soil profile, and a soil sample was collected from 0-20 cm soil depth for analyzing in Lab for soil physicals and chemicals.

### 2.2.2 Morphology and Anatomy

A total of five fully-developed plants of Tuyen Quang ginseng were randomly selected for morphological descriptions including leaves, stem, root, flower, fruit, and seed. Shape, color, and dimension of each organ were described through observation by taxonomists. In addition, slices of stems and roots were also used for anatomy by observing through microscope [9]. Slices of 40-60  $\mu\text{m}$  were cut by using special equipment. The slices were then stained by chrysanthemum (0.5%) and safranin (1%). It was then cleaned by purified water and observed through microscope.

### 2.2.3 Saponin Content

A root of a 6-year old plant of Tuyen Quang ginseng was collected for saponin analysis. Total saponin was estimated by weighing. Approximate one gram powder of the dried root sample was weighed, 100 ml *n*-hexane was then added. The mixture was extracted with

Soxhlet extraction apparatus in six hours and filtered. The residue was continuously extracted with Soxhlet extraction apparatus with 100 ml of 70% methanol for 6 hours. The combined filtrate was concentrated under reduced pressure with a rotary evaporator to obtain extract. The methanol extract was diluted in 30 ml of water and then fractionated with water saturated *n*-butanol until no color was observed in *n*-butanol layer. The filtrated butanol extract was then evaporated under reduced pressure to yield butanol extract. This extract was dissolved in 10 ml of 70% ethanol then transferred into a porcelain beaker and evaporated solvent to get extract. The obtained extract was dried in an oven at 105 °C until constant weight. Total saponin content (X) was calculated as:  $X = [(b \times 100)/(m \times (100 - d))] \times 100$ , where b is obtained saponin weight (g), d is moisture of root powder (%), and m is initial weight of root powder (g).

### 3. RESULTS

#### 3.1 Ecology

Tuyen Quang ginseng distributes in evergreen broadleaved forests of both disturbed and undisturbed forests. The height of forest canopy is taller than 15 m. The canopy structure includes two or three layers with the shortest layer of 7-10 m tall and the difference between layers of 4-6 m. Tuyen Quang ginseng prefers to grow in forests with canopy cover of >50%. The species composition of forest canopy, where Tuyen Quang ginseng grows, includes tree species of *Saurauia napaulensis* DC., *Callicarpa arborea* Roxb., *Alniphyllum eberhardtii* Guillaumin, *Schefflera macrophylla* (Dunn) R.Vig., *Machilus chinensis* (Benth.) Hemsl., and *Pavetta indica* L. with density of 650-860 trees/ha. The low vegetation layer on forest floor includes plants of *Asarum caudigerum*, *Lophatherum gracile* Brongn., *Alpinia chinensis* (Retz.) Roscoe, *Cyclosorus parasiticus* (L.) Farw., and *Polygonum chiensis* L. with cover >80%. The litter layer on forest floor is thick and wet most time of the year.

Suitable climate conditions for Tuyen Quang ginseng include annual precipitation of 1,700-1,900 mm, annual air humidity of >85%, annual air temperature of 23°C, minimum temperature of >5°C, and maximum temperature of <30°C. Tuyen Quang ginseng distributes on elevation zone of 980-1,200 m above sea level, growing well in mountain foots, flat areas, and well drainage soils.

Soil profile indicates the litter layer of 4-5 cm, humus layer of 2-3 cm with dark color and humidity of 56-60%, and total soil depth of >100 cm. Tuyen Quang ginseng naturally grows in acidic soil with pH of 4.5-5.0, high humus soil of 6.5-9% (Table 1). Content of sand particles is high, indicating drainage soil. Nitrogen is not much required by Tuyen Quang ginseng as it can grow in low N content soil of 0.5%.

### 3.1 Morphology

Tuyen Quang ginseng is a perennial plant, up to 60 cm tall at maturity (Fig. 2). Root lies horizontally without root branching. Each root contains one aerial stem with leaves. In very rare case, it may contains 2-3 aerial stems. Root is brown to light yellow (Fig. 2) with numerous scars as results of dead aerial stems of each growing year. Scars arranges alternately in root. The head of root is big and global, while the end of root is much smaller and contains bunch of small roots for absorbing water and nutrient. Color of inner part of root is light yellow or violet (Fig. 2). Total root length is 3.2-26.5 cm and diameter is 1.2-3.3 cm.

Aerial stem dies in winter and new one starts from root head in spring. This creates scars in roots (Fig. 2). Aerial stem is 20-60 cm height and 0.3-0.8 cm diameter. It is green and/or light violet without hairs (Fig. 3). Each aerial stem contains 1-4 main leaves and each main leaf contains 4-6 sub-leaves (Fig. 3). There are tiny hairs covering both sides of sub-leaves (Fig. 3). Each aerial stem contains an inflorescence on top (Fig. 2 and 4), which is 15-25 cm length and contains 40-120 flowers. The inflorescence is 3-4.5 cm in diameter. When ripen, fruits become red. Seeds are white with a triangle shape. Flower season is May-July and season of ripen fruits is October-December.

### 3.3 Anatomy and Saponin

Results indicated aerial stem of Tuyen Quang Ginseng includes main parts as cutin layer in outermost, epidermis, xylem, phloem, and xylem ray (Fig. 5). While, transverse section of root indicated main layer of epidermis, oxalate, phloem, xylem, and xylem ray (Fig. 6).

Total saponin content of Tuyen Quang ginseng (*Panax* sp.) is 13.7%, much higher than that of *P. stipuleanatus* and *P. bipinnatifidus* (Table 2). However, it is lower than that of *P. vietnamensis* var. *fuscidiscus* (21.9%) and *P. vietnamensis* (22.3%), two well-known ginsengs in Vietnam.

#### 4. DISCUSSION

Forest herbs like ginseng can only survive and grow well under shades of other vegetation [10-12]. Therefore, Tuyen Quang ginseng can only be found in evergreen broadleaved forests with canopy cover of >50%, and low vegetation cover of >80%. Forest structure including more than two layers of trees, and low vegetation layer [13] is important for the existence of Tuyen Quang ginseng. Low cover of tree layer will allow direct sunlight to forest floor, reducing soil moisture, litter layers, soil organic carbon *etc.*, which is not a favorable condition for existence of Tuyen Quang ginseng [14]. Soil with high ratio of sandy particles and high humus content (Table 1) indicates low compact soil, which supports growth of roots in the soil. If soil is compact with low humus content, the soil is high water holding capacity with low soil air. Such kind of soil will never support growth of plants which have roots as main part of their body. Therefore, selecting suitable soil is important for growing Tuyen Quang ginseng. It must be high humus content and drainage soil.

Morphological observation of the five ginsengs in Vietnam indicated several differences of Tuyen Quang ginseng with others (Table 3). The most different characteristic is number of leaves per aerial stem, which contains 1-4 leaves per stem in Tuyen Quang ginseng compared to 3-5 in others [15]. Number of flowers were also most numerous of up to 120 flower per inflorescence in Tuyen Quang ginseng. It seems that Tuyen Quang ginseng most look like *P. vietnamensis*. However, there is a possibility of a new sub-species found in Tuyen Quang. Therefore, further study such as DNA analysis is required to identify where the Tuyen Quang ginseng (*Panax* sp.) is a new sub-species of ginseng in Vietnam.

Anatomy of Tuyen Quang ginseng is similar to that of other ginsengs and plants [9, 16], which have been widely used as traditional medicines. Root shows clusters of oxalate, which is known as containing high saponin; the main active chemical component of ginseng.

The saponin content of Tuyen Quang ginseng is much higher than that of *P. stipulealatus* and *P. bipinnatifidus* (Table 2), which have been widely grown and marketed for poverty reduction in mountainous areas of Vietnam. In addition, current price of Tuyen Quang ginseng ranges 1,000-2,600 US\$/ 1 kg, depending on size and age of roots [17]. Therefore, growing Tuyen Quang ginseng could also contribute to poverty reduction in Tuyen Quang

province. However, researches on planting Tuyen Quang ginseng should be conducted to issue the applicable growing guideline.

## 5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Tuyen Quang ginseng –*Panax sp.* has natural distribution in Thuong Lam commune Lam Binh district and Sinh Long commune, Na Hang district of Tuyen Quang province, North Vietnam. The species distributes in evergreen broadleaved forests on the elevation of 980–1,200 m above sea level. The species only distributes in forests with canopy cover >50% and cover of low vegetation layer of >80%. The soil is acidic with pH of 4.5–5.0 and high ratio of sandy particles, indicating drainage soil.

Tuyen Quang ginseng has high saponin content (13.7%) and is a potential forest herb for poverty reduction to ethnic communities in the province. Study on growing techniques must be conducted, which is valuable for local communities. Selecting vegetation types for growing Tuyen Quang ginseng is important, which must have high canopy cover of >50% and high cover of low vegetation layer of >80%.

There is a possibility that Tuyen Quang ginseng is a new sub-species because of some differences of its morphological characteristics compared to other ginsengs in Vietnam. However, detail analysis such as DNA application should be conducted for a precise conclusion.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research is supported by Silviculture Research Institute, Vietnamese Academy of Forest Sciences, and Vietnam National Science and Technology Programme for Sustainable Development in Northwest Region Managed through Vietnam National University under grant no. KHCN–TB.16c/13–18. We would like to thank anonymous reviewers for constructive comments on the manuscript.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.



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**Table 1.** Physical and chemical characteristics ( $\pm$ SE) of soil samples

| Research site           | Density<br>(g/cm <sup>3</sup> ) | Silt<br>(< 0.002<br>mm; %) | Lam<br>(0.002-0.02<br>mm; %) | Sand<br>(2-0.02<br>mm; %) | pH               | Humus<br>content<br>(%) | N<br>(%)         | K <sub>2</sub> O<br>(%) |
|-------------------------|---------------------------------|----------------------------|------------------------------|---------------------------|------------------|-------------------------|------------------|-------------------------|
| Thuong Lam,<br>Lam Binh | 1,135.8<br>$\pm$ 27.0           | 12.7<br>$\pm$ 0.9          | 33.0 $\pm$ 1.9               | 54.3<br>$\pm$ 2.7         | 4.5<br>$\pm$ 0.3 | 6.7<br>$\pm$ 0.9        | 0.5<br>$\pm$ 0.1 | 2.5<br>$\pm$ 0.3        |
| Sinh Long,<br>Na Hang   | 1,156.5<br>$\pm$ 8.5            | 4.3<br>$\pm$ 0.0           | 34.9<br>$\pm$ 1.4            | 60.8<br>$\pm$ 1.4         | 4.9<br>$\pm$ 0.3 | 8.9<br>$\pm$ 1.1        | 0.6<br>$\pm$ 0.0 | 3.2<br>$\pm$ 0.3        |

**Table 2.** Saponin content of ginsengs in Vietnam

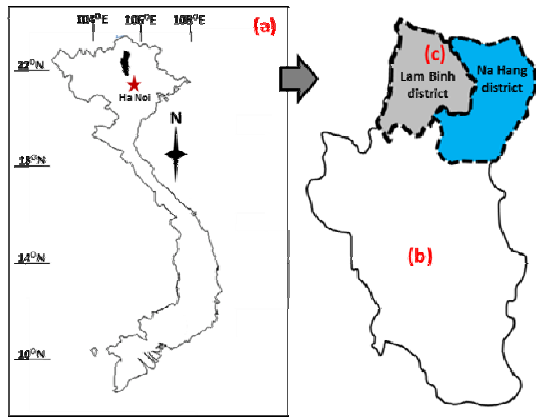
| Species  | Root source   | Saponin content (%) |
|--|---|---------------------|
| <i>Panax sp.</i> - Tuyen Quang ginseng (study species)                         | Natural, Tuyen Quang province   | 13.7                |
| <i>Panax stipulealatus</i> Tsai & K.m. Feng                                    | Growing in garden of local people in Laichau Province, five years old | 7.1*                |
| <i>Panax bipinnatifidus</i> Seem.,   | Growing in garden of local people in Laichau Province, five years old | 7.5*                |
| <i>Panax vietnamensis</i> var <i>fuscidicus</i> K. Komatsu, S. Zhu & S.Q. Cai. | Growing in garden of local people in Laichau Province, five years old | 21.9*               |
| <i>Panax vietnamensis</i> Ha et Grushv   | Natural, central Vietnam  | 22.3*               |

\* cited from Tuyen [17].

**Table 3.** Morphological characteristics of five ginsengs in Vietnam.

|                             | Species                   |                            |  |                          |  |
|-----------------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------|--|--------------------------|--|
|                             | <i>P. stipuleanatus</i> * | <i>P. vietnamensis</i> *   | <i>P. vietnamensis</i> var. <i>fuscidiscus</i> * | <i>P. notogingseng</i> * | <i>Panax sp.</i> (Tuyen Quang ginseng) |
| Root distribution           | Horizontal                | Horizontal                 | Horizontal                                       | Vertical                 | Horizontal                             |
| Root scar                   | In line                   | Alternate                  | Alternate  | Random                   | Alternate                              |
| Color of inner part of root | White green               | Yellow or light violet     | Yellow or light violet                           | Yellow or light violet   | Yellow or light violet                 |
| Aerial stem                 | Violet or green           | Violet                     | Violet   | Violet                   | Green or light violet                  |
| Leaves per stem             | 3                         | 3-5                        | 3-5  | 4                        | 1-4                                    |
| No. flowers                 | 60-80                     | 50-120                     | 40-120   | 40-120                   | 40-120                                 |
| Flower color                | White green               | White green                | White green                                      | White green              | White green                            |
| Stamen                      | 1                         | 1-2                        | 1-2  | 2-3                      | 1-2                                    |
| Pistil                      | 1-2                       | 1-2                        | 1-3  | 2-3                      | 1-2                                    |
| Color of ripen fruit        | Red                       | Red with black dots on top | Red with black dots on top                       | Red                      | Red                                    |
| Shape of fruit              | Kidney shape              | Kidney shape               | Kidney shape                                     | Half global or triangle  | Kidney shape or half global            |
| Seeds per fruit             | 1-2                       | 1-2                        | 1-3  | 2-3                      | 1-2                                    |
| Shape of seed               | Kidney shape              | Kidney shape               | Kidney shape                                     | Triangle                 | Triangle                               |

\* cited from Bon [15] and Tuyen [17].



**Fig. 1.** Map of Vietnam (a), Tuyen Quang province (b), and Lam Binh and Na Hang districts – field survey sites (c).



**Fig. 2.** Full plant of Tuyen Quang ginseng (above left), root (above right), and root transverse sections (below; light yellow in left and violet in right).

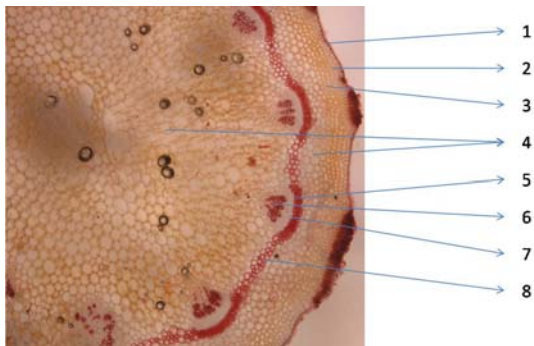


**Fig. 3.** Aerial stem (1), sub-leaves (2) back side of leaf (3), front side of leaf (4), and bract (5).

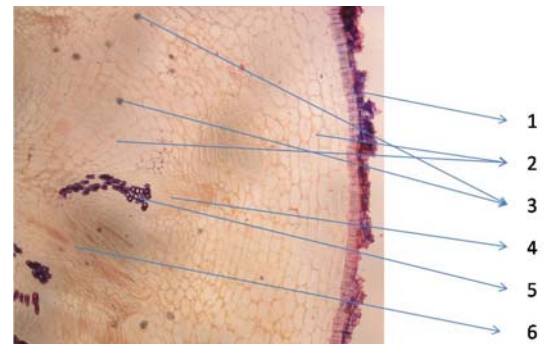


**Fig. 4.** Inflorescence (1), bract (2), palea (3), sepal (4), petal (5), stamen (6), pistil (7), stigma splits (8), fruit lengthwise (9), fruit (10).





**Fig. 5.** Transverse section of aerial stem. Cutin (1), epidermis (2), collenchyma (3), axial parenchyma (4), sclerenchyma (5), xylem (6), phloem (7), xylem ray (8).



**Fig. 6.** Transverse section of root. Epidermis (1), axial parenchyma (2), clusters of calcium oxalate (3), phloem (4), xylem (5), xylem rays (6).