



Passages

Sustainable Food and Farming Systems

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Below: The forest onion called the ramp (or wild leek in parts of the northeast).
Right: Eric Burkhart (far right) continues to educate others about how to enjoy nature's bounty on their forestlands in a sustainable way.



Forest Farming in Focus

Ramps, Non-timber Forest Products and 'Forest Grown' Verification

By Eric Burkhart, Botanist, Agroforester and Plant Science Program Director, Shaver's Creek Environmental Center and Lee Rinehart, Director of Education and Outreach, Pennsylvania Certified Organic

Something stinks about the ramp supply these days...and we are talking about more than just the smell of this wild forest onion! In recent years, there has been a growing interest amongst consumers, chefs, and forest landowners in harvesting and consuming the forest onion called the ramp (or wild leek in parts of the northeast). As someone who spends a good deal of time promoting non-timber forest product (or NTFP) enjoyment through workshops and forest walks, I (Eric) have generally welcomed this interest and have tried to provide folks with guidance to enjoy nature's bounty on their forestlands in a sustainable way. I have long been concerned about the myopic view that most forest landowners adopt when it comes to their forest — most simply see it as a collection of timber or firewood, or a place to go hunting once or twice a year — and they ignore all of the native biological wealth that we are fortunate to have here in the eastern deciduous forests.

However, this growing interest in ramps has not been all good. Last year, for example, I witnessed individuals destructively and unsustainably harvesting ramps from public forestlands, leaving behind holes and uprooted native forest wildflowers. These wild-crafters were harvesting in an amazing botanical wild area with tens of thousands of trillium (among many, many other plants) and I was stunned to find uprooted trilliums lying on top of the ground where ramps had been clawed out of the hillside.

These types of behaviors unfortunately are all too common in some wild-crafting circles. Individuals learn about a particular plant or mushroom, and he/she ruthlessly goes after it with little consideration of the other plants (and critters!) that co-occur with the 'target good.' Perhaps even more disturbing than careless harvesting for personal use is the increasing trend to harvest these products for market with the same thoughtless disregard. Only now, instead of harvesting a few dozen ramp bulbs for personal consumption, some folks are harvesting thousands of ramps for economic gain. And these ramps are being shipped all over the United States. Last year, I received inquiries from west coast distributors wanting ramps for restaurant clients.

This has very naturally led to many conservation-minded consumers suggesting that we boycott the consumption of ramps altogether, or to only consume a portion of the plants (e.g., the tops). What was once a feel good rite-of-spring is now marred by greed and unscrupulous behavior. And this is a very sad set of circumstances, since I believe more of us must affirm our regional roots and reconnect with local wild foods just as more of us continue to connect with our local farmers.

So, what is to be done?

continued on page 3

Forest Farming in Focus

continued from page 1

From wildcrafting to forest farming

There is something primal and oh-so-necessary for many of us when heading out to the woods to gather our favorite goods from the woods. Whether it's the ramps of spring, or the hen's (a.k.a., hen-of-the-woods) of the fall, there is an incomparable thrill and satisfaction that comes from pursuing wild forest produce, of learning the cycles of nature, and acknowledging the complex ecological relationships that must evolve, often over a long period of time, for these 'free' goods to occur in abundance. For many of us, this is where we will choose to leave it. That is, as a hobby to be appreciated as an interesting diversion or recreation.

But for others, the farming of ramps on forestlands is an emerging opportunity that is also potential driver of land stewardship and conservation. The ability to manage and sustainably harvest NTFPs encourages landowners to value and maintain their forest through deriving income from it in ways other than cutting it for timber, or leasing it for natural gas. For these forest farmer entrepreneurs, there should be a way to connect with consumers interested in buying wild forest produce from sustainably minded producers. And now there is!

The 'forest-grown' verification program

If you are fortunate enough to be able to develop, manage, and harvest your own ramp patch, then of course this is the ideal solution. However, for those who cannot, or who would like to

support forest landowners trying to develop sustainable business opportunities from NTFPs, there are new efforts underway to cultivate and label NTFPs. These efforts seek to reclaim the supply chain from unscrupulous wildcrafters and provide assurances to the consumers who are not fortunate to have their own ramp patch. While it is unfortunate it has come to this point, it is nevertheless an inescapable fact that we are living in times where market supply chains are often exceedingly complex and it's hard to know where your seasonal, wild goods come from. What used to be small and localized, has become big business to some!

Many conscientious forest farmers have proven that fragile wild ecologies can be managed and harvested sustainably, reducing the threat to forest plant biodiversity while meeting the demand for wild medicinal and culinary plants. But how does an ecologically and morally connected person source legitimate products with assurance?

In 2014, a new verification and labeling program was launched by Pennsylvania Certified Organic (PCO) for NTFPs produced on forestlands. Through the new Forest Grown Verification Program PCO has established a third party verification, with an accompanying product label, that assures consumers the NTFPs they purchase have been sustainably and legally produced and harvested. The program sets the standard for forest farmers and consumers who are concerned about the long-term regenerative capability of wild populations.

Currently the program standards apply to producers and processors of American ginseng products from private forestland, and PCO is increasing the non-timber forest products verified under the program to include other botanical and fungal products including black cohosh, goldenseal, mushrooms (including log-based shiitake production), and forest farmed ramps.

The comprehensive Forest Grown Verification Program standards were developed by PCO through research of federal and state regulations, consultations with industry professionals, information from scientific publications, and public comment. In addition to an

For further information

■ Contact Adam Seitz, PCO Certification Specialist at (814) 422-0251 to obtain a Forest Grown System Plan, or visit paorganic.org/forestgrown for more information and a PCO Forest Grown Verification Program Manual.

■ Learn more about ramps and ramp forest farming in this recent USDA National Agroforestry Center publication: nac.unl.edu/documents/agroforestrynotes/an47ff08.pdf

initial on-site and annual inspections forest farmers must demonstrate, through a Forest Grown System Plan, that wild plants are harvested only when reproductive maturity has been reached, after the fruit is fully ripened and seeds matured, and that seeds from harvested plants are planted in the vicinity of the harvest site. In addition, the use of inputs must originate from the forest production area, such as leaf biomass and wood chips, and any inputs that do not originate from the forest production area must be labeled for agricultural or forestry use and must be consistent with best management practices.

Program compliant forest farmers are issued a Certificate of Verification and may claim that their product has been verified under the PCO Forest Grown Program by use of the PCO Forest Grown seal on verified product labeling and marketing materials. PCO Forest Grown is a stand-alone program, and organic certification is not a requirement.

Getting more forest grown producers on board is PCO's principal focus, evidenced by a cost-share program designed to incentivize verification by reducing the costs to producers. The Forest Grown Cost Share program is a joint effort between United Plant Savers (UPS) and PCO to offset verification fees for PCO Verified Forest Grown production operations. UPS has dedicated funds specifically for the program that will be administered by PCO, with the potential to continue the program on an annual basis. The funds provided by UPS for the cost share program helps reduce the financial burden of growers who harvest forest products with careful attention to the sustainability of forest ecologies. ■

