



50 STATES, 50 FIXES

## Virginians Are Restoring a Forest Economy Built on Herbs and Tradition

Farmers have banded together to make the market for herbal supplements and remedies, part of Appalachia's cultural heritage, more sustainable and more profitable.



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**By Austyn Gaffney** Photographs and Video by Morgan Hornsby

Reporting from Duffield, Va.

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The forest behind Ryan Huish’s home doesn’t look like a traditional farm, but beneath the bright green canopy in southwest Virginia, he’s nurturing a thriving garden of medicinal herbs.

On a warm afternoon in April, Dr. Huish, a biology professor at the University of Virginia’s College at Wise, led a troop of students along a footpath that wove through part of his family’s 60-acre property near Duffield. He encouraged students to pick edible plants like ramps (hints of garlic, they reported), pluck the leaves of trout lilies (sort of like kiwi) and dig up roots like Appalachian wasabi (yes, spicy).

For centuries, these forest plants have been a part of Appalachian cultural heritage, used by local people for food, traditional medicine and extra income. But the market has long been poorly regulated, which has led to low prices and overharvesting.

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**50 States, 50 Fixes** is a series about local solutions to environmental problems. More to come this year.

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“The trade of forest botanicals has been going on for the past 300 years in the Appalachian Mountains,” said Katie Commender, director of the agroforestry program at a local nonprofit organization called the Appalachian Harvest Herb Hub. “When we talk to ginseng dealers and root buyers, a lot of the concern we hear is that tradition is dying out and not necessarily being passed on to the next generation.”

Now, that's changing. Since 2017, Herb Hub has been building guardrails for this backdoor economy. The group acts as a procurement and marketing service that helps farmers combine their forest and farm products to reach more buyers, while training them to grow and harvest more sustainably..

Ryan Huish, a biology professor at the University of Virginia's College at Wise, on his farm in Duffield, Va., in April.

Dr. Huish, who is also a producer for the Appalachian Harvest Herb Hub, gave a tour of his farm.

## Rewards for 'doing things the right way'

In a grassy yard next to the Herb Hub's warehouse in Duffield, twisted roots resembling pale carrots covered a long table. Paul Michael Combs, a 39-year-old harvester who has picked wild herbs since he was a child, tossed small piles of Solomon's seal roots, used in traditional medicine, into a modified cement mixer. That week, he'd dug up more than 30 pounds.

He sprayed the roots with a hose while spinning the mixer barrel to dislodge dirt. By the afternoon, the roots would be placed on ice and then shipped overnight to Red Moon Herbs, a shop in Asheville, N.C., that sells teas, syrups and salves.

Plants like Solomon's seal can take many years to grow. The roots Mr. Combs harvested were roughly 10 to 15 years old. He used to do all this processing at home before delivering the product to a local herb dealer.

While both local independent dealers and his Herb Hub dealer take about half the profit, he said he could earn much more thorough the hub. That's because a local dealer might set a selling price of about \$20 per pound for his Solomon's seal, while the Herb Hub can get about \$60. Mr. Combs said he expected this batch to sell for about \$2,000 and that he'd take home around \$1,000.

This sale is part of a growing herbal medicine market set to explode to \$580 billion by 2034, from \$87 billion in 2024, according to Towards Food and Beverage, a market analysis firm based in Ottawa.

Mr. Combs at the Herb Hub. He used to do all processing at home before delivering the product to a local dealer.

Ginseng preserved by a Herb Hub customer. Mr. Combs inherited a ginseng patch from his grandmother and hopes to pass it down to his own children.

To take advantage of that growth, the Herb Hub provides expensive processing equipment and helps farmers combine their products to get more marketable amounts. Careful processing is important because herbal remedies are regulated as dietary supplements by the Food and Drug Administration, which means that they can't be adulterated.

The idea grew out of a successful food hub that was founded by Appalachian Sustainable Development, a nonprofit group. Since 2017 the Herb Hub has sold 2,880 pounds, and demand is now more robust than ever. More than a third of those sales occurred in 2023 and 2024.

Overseeing Mr. Combs was David Wallace, a cattle farmer from Cleveland, Va., who runs a multipronged business called Reeds Valley Farms. Since 2023, Mr. Wallace has been a dealer coordinating between harvesters like Mr. Combs and buyers like Red Moon Herbs.

Both are members of the Wild Stewards Alliance, a certification program that began in 2022. So far, the program has certified more than 100 people in Virginia, Tennessee and Kentucky.

“What we’re trying to do is reward people financially by doing things the right way,” said Robin Suggs, the Herb Hub procurement manager.

Within this expanding market, growers and harvesters are focused on sustainability and protecting forest health. Although Mr. Combs could make plenty of money from the ginseng patch his grandmother planted in the late 1970s, he said he wouldn’t touch it. He hopes that it’ll be even more plentiful for his own children and grandchildren.

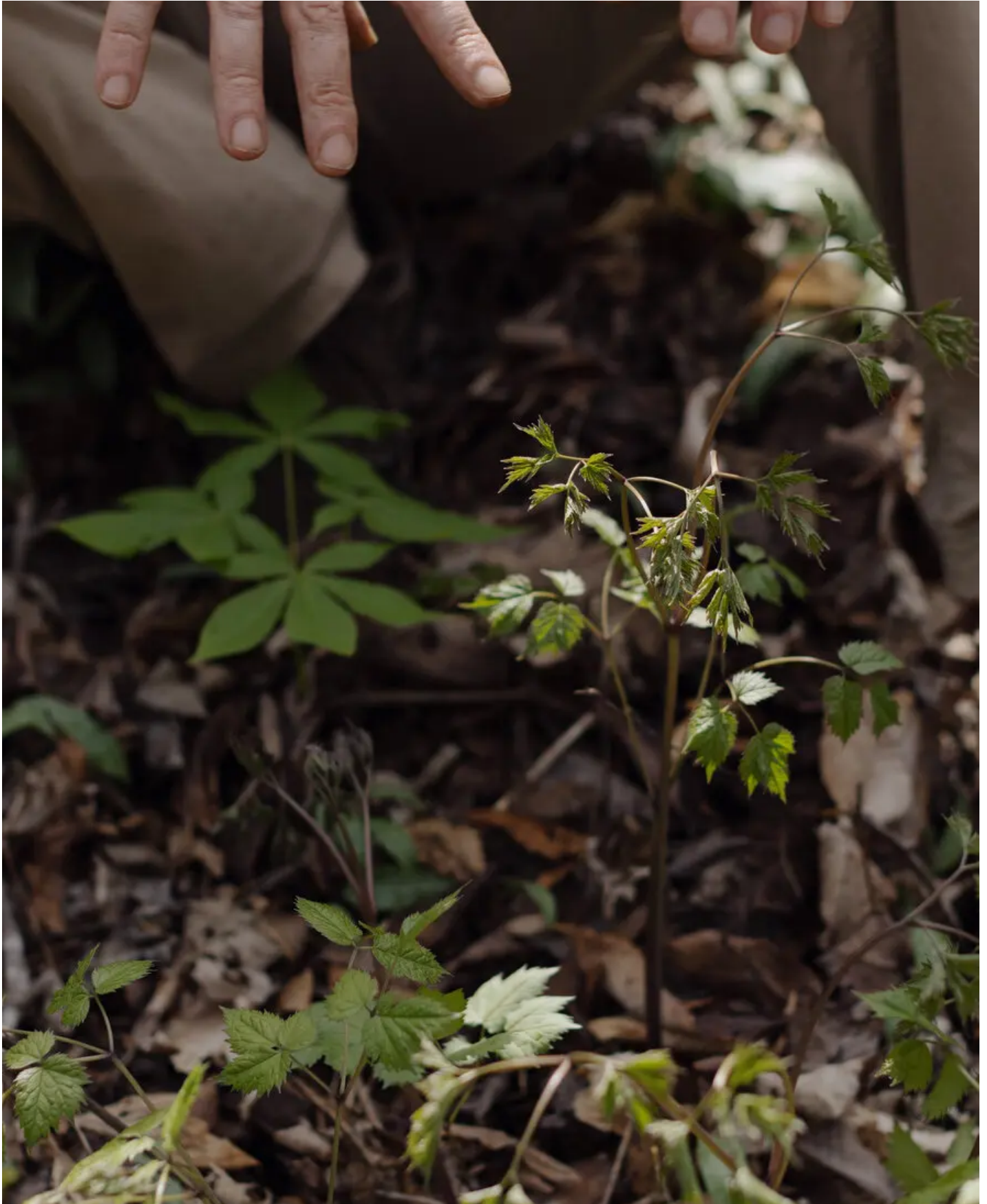
He worries that popular herbs could get overharvested or poached from private land, so he follows alliance-backed practices like picking during an herb’s peak season and planting back. The program includes compliance checks that rely on harvesters holding one another accountable.

Visiting students sampled edible herbs and plants last month on Dr. Huish's farm.


Katie Commender, the director of agroforestry at the Appalachian Harvest Herb Hub, sniffed spearmint at Reeds Valley Farms in Cleveland, Va.











Dr. Huish identified plants on a walking tour of his farm.

“It brings it out into the open and keeps people honest,” said Mr. Wallace, who, along with dealing, grows field herbs. He has received a \$10,000 grant from Lush Cosmetics, a Canadian company that was an early partner with the hub, to determine which herbs grow most sustainably in Central Appalachia. On a flat patch of land he’s run trials with rows of lemon balm, elderberry, peppermint and nettle.

To keep up with the expanding market, the Herb Hub is building a new processing center and demonstration farm on 14.5 acres in Bristol, Va., with the help of more than \$700,000 in federal grants. The group is also working with Rural Action, a nonprofit organization based in Appalachian Ohio that works to make the region’s agricultural sector more resilient, to open a second hub for forest farmers.

On a recent forest walk with his students, Dr. Huish emphasized that while the hub was growing, it’s about much more than profit.

“It’s easy to get caught up in the economics, but it’s about the relationship with the plants,” Dr. Huish said. “It’s a sacred service we’re doing to help people be able to maintain their health and have a good life.”

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**Austyn Gaffney** is a reporter covering climate and a member of the 2024-25 Times Fellowship class, a program for journalists early in their careers.