A Virginia Cooperative Extension program called Adding Value to Woodlands with American Ginseng began in Virginia in 1987. This program was developed by Andy Hankins, Extension Specialist-Alternative Agriculture at Virginia State University in Petersburg. In the last twenty years, he has increased woodland production of American ginseng throughout Virginia by using the following Extension methods:

1. Establishment of Extension research demonstration plots in privately owned woodlands.
2. Ginseng conferences and ginseng field meetings.
3. Individual consultations with landowners concerning American ginseng production and marketing.
4. Media releases including newspaper articles, radio presentations and television presentations.

As an Extension Specialist with 100% extension appointment, Mr. Hankins has not conducted scientific research studies concerning ginseng. His work concerning ginseng is focused on outreach to Virginia landowners. He has developed Extension research demonstrations to try to answer very basic questions concerning ginseng production in Virginia. These questions include:

1. Can the wild-simulated method of growing American ginseng enable Virginia landowners to establish naturalized populations of ginseng in their privately owned woodlands?
2. Can American ginseng be grown in the mountain, piedmont and tidewater regions of Virginia, using the wild-simulated ginseng production method?
3. How many pounds of dried roots of ginseng can a landowner expect to harvest from each pound of seeds planted, when using the wild-simulated ginseng production method?

When Andy Hankins first began work as an Extension Specialist at Virginia State University in 1987 he knew that he wanted to learn more about growing ginseng. In August of that year he made an appointment to meet with Dr. Tom Konsler, an Extension Vegetable Production Specialist with North Carolina State University at the Mountain Horticulture Research and Extension Center in Fletcher, North Carolina. Dr. Konsler shared a great deal of his research findings concerning ginseng with Andy Hankins. He also introduced him to Scott Persons, a local ginseng grower and ginseng seed producer who had just finished writing a book called American Ginseng: Green Gold. Andy Hankins started buying ginseng seeds from Scott Persons at Tuckasegee Valley Ginseng to develop Extension research and demonstration plots in Virginia.

Wild-simulated ginseng production was a very new term in 1987. It meant that stratified ginseng seeds from cultivated sources should be planted on the forest floor with a minimal amount of soil disturbance and allowed to grow without care. At that time, no particular system had been established to plant ginseng seeds for wild-simulated production. Not knowing any better, Andy Hankins made up his own system. He always planted stratified ginseng seeds in October and November on north, east or northeast facing slopes under hardwood trees. Andy wanted to test wild-simulated ginseng production at many different sites. His plan for demonstration plots at each selected site involved the planting of four ounces of stratified ginseng seeds. Using a leaf rake, he would first sweep leaves away from a section of forest floor that was five feet wide and fifty feet long. Using a mattock, Andy made three shallow furrows down the length of each section. These planting rows were spaced 18 inches apart. In each furrow, he placed seeds by hand three inches apart and covered them with ¼ inch of soil. After planting, he would always walk down each planted row to firm the soil around the seed. The last step involved raking leaves about four inches of leaves back over the planted section to serve as protective mulch. One ounce of seeds would be used to plant each of these 250 square foot plots. His standard demonstration at each site was four plots. He marked the corners of these planted sections with wire flags. These woodland demonstrations could be planted in two to four...
hours depending on how much additional labor was available. In this wild-simulated ginseng production system, after planting, no further work is done. The young plants come up the next spring and are just left alone to live or die for the next ten years to twelve years. The goal is to establish a naturalized stand of ginseng on the forest floor. Damaging effects of weeds, insects, diseases, drought, wildlife, etc. are not controlled. The plants are allowed to grow wild and the roots that are eventually harvested can be sold as wild roots.

Every year from 1987 to 1999, Andy Hankins planted three pounds of ginseng seeds in privately owned woods throughout Virginia with many different landowners. He usually established twelve demonstrations each fall. His first demonstrations were planted in the Blue Ridge Mountains in sites that seemed to be ideal for ginseng production. As the years went by, he started getting requests for information about ginseng production from landowners who lived in Central Virginia in the piedmont region. Most of the land area within Virginia is located in the piedmont and tidewater regions. At first, following conventional wisdom, Andy told people who lived in the lower elevations that American ginseng could not possibly grow on their land. The books stated that ginseng must be grown on a cool mountain slope surrounded by indicator plants like black cohosh, bloodroot and maidenhair fern. In 1993, when prices for dried ginseng roots began to approach $400 per pound, requests for ginseng assistance from landowners outside of the mountains became so insistent that Andy Hankins decided to try some test plots in both the Northern Piedmont and in the Southern Piedmont regions of Virginia. He also planted a few ginseng research demonstrations in the light sandy soils found in the Tidewater region of Virginia near the Chesapeake Bay.

In February of 1988, Andy Hankins held an Extension educational meeting concerning ginseng production in Charlottesville, Virginia. Dr. Tom Konsler from North Carolina State University was the guest speaker. About 80 persons attended this first program. As the years went by, Andy developed his own slide presentation concerning ginseng production. He spoke about ginseng to large and small audiences at local meetings throughout Virginia. He invited Scott Persons to give presentations at several landowner conferences. Audiences were generally very pleased to finally receive comprehensive information about ginseng. Andy did receive a few complaints from ginseng growers who believed that knowledge of ginseng should be kept secret. He was also criticized by a number of Extension Agents for promoting a crop that would be stolen before anyone could harvest it. During this period American ginseng was receiving a fair amount of attention by the press in Virginia. One widely-read newspaper article concerned ginseng poachers being caught digging roots illegally in the Shenandoah National Park. Andy Hankins began writing articles concerning American ginseng for newsletters and newspapers that were focused on production, marketing and conservation. He also participated in development of two documentaries concerning ginseng with local television stations.

In August of 1995, Andy Hankins held a first Wild-Simulated Ginseng Production Field Meeting at the Northern Piedmont Agriculture Research Center in Orange County, Virginia. Seeds he planted in 1987 had grown very well in privately-owned woods about four miles from that public research station. Publicity for the field meeting suggested that participants would have an opportunity to harvest wild ginseng roots. Nearly 200 people came to this educational program in about 100 automobiles. Since everyone had to drive to the secret demonstration site, state police were recruited to provide traffic control. They also provided yellow police tape to keep the crowd from crushing the plots. Andy learned that American ginseng can be used for successful field meetings only if some of the participants in his research program would be willing to allow the public to visit their woodland production sites. The best landowner to use for a future field meeting is an older person who will not become a committed ginseng grower. On the day of the field meeting all of the mature roots should be harvested. Any roots left behind in the woods, after a public field meeting, are likely to “disappear”. It takes some forward thinking for Extension personnel to develop a field demonstration that will be presented seven to ten years later but the years do go by quickly and live ginseng plants always create a lot of excitement.

In the Spring of 1996, Andy Hankins was invited to participate in development of a proposal to the Foreign Agricultural Service of USDA called the China-West Virginia Ginseng Research Exchange. The proposal was approved for funding and in July of 1996, Andy Hankins traveled to China with two Extension Agents from West Virginia named John Scott and David Cooke. These three Extension personnel visited state-owned ginseng farms, university ginseng research stations and ginseng markets in five provinces of
Northeast China. They had a great time learning about production of both Asian ginseng and American ginseng in China. American ginseng has been grown in China since about 1975. At one university research station in Jilin Province there were thirteen PhD level ginseng research scientists investigating every possible aspect of this valuable plant. All of the ginseng, these three visitors saw in China, was growing under artificial shade. The abundant woodlands found all over the Eastern United States do not exist in China. This single observation helped Cooke, Hankins and Scott believe that the future market for wild and wild simulated roots of American ginseng from the U.S. was secure from over production.

In 2000, Andy Hankins developed Virginia Cooperative Extension publication 354-312: Producing and Marketing Wild Simulated Ginseng in Forest and Agro-Forestry Systems. This numbered publication was posted on the Virginia Cooperative Extension - VCE Website. The presence of this publication on the Internet has brought a great number of inquiries to Andy from landowners all over the United States. Research and Extension personnel from several land-grant universities in the Eastern United States have published publications concerning American ginseng in recent years. Many of these university professionals also organize annual conferences concerning ginseng and other botanical herbs. Several non-government organizations like Rural Action in Ohio have also contributed a great deal to outreach education concerning American ginseng.

In August of 2005, Andy Hankins received approval for a grant proposal entitled, Adding Value to Woodlands with American Ginseng from the Specialty Agriculture Research Grant Research Program operated by the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services. Andy received $26,000 to conduct a one-year educational program. He immediately purchased 200 pounds of stratified ginseng seeds and six cases of an excellent book entitled, Growing and Marketing of Ginseng, Goldenseal and Other Woodland Medicinals, by Scott Persons and Jeanine Davis. Andy sent an e-mail message to all of the Agriculture Extension Agents in Virginia inviting them to recruit landowners to participate in this grant funded project. The idea of the project was to learn by doing. Each participant received one or two pounds of ginseng seeds in time for fall planting and a copy of the book. This was a shotgun approach to ginseng education. It is not likely that every person who received those pounds of seeds planted them carefully in a good location. Andy received a slight amount of criticism for not following through with each of these landowners. He did not have time to follow up with 160 landowners on an individual basis. Most of the Virginia Agriculture Extension Agents participating in this program have followed up with these beginner ginseng growers very well. Many of the participants in this ginseng planting program have expressed their gratitude for this assistance.

In the last four years, Virginia State University has received financial support from the Renewable Resources Extension Act (RREA) of USDA to develop educational programs concerning production of American ginseng and other woodland crops. This agency is concerned about the fragmentation of forestland throughout the United States. Real estate development has especially caused a grievous loss of forest land in Virginia. Andy Hankins has used these funds to develop a number of conferences called Income Opportunities for Woodlot Owners. At these conferences, leading experts from across the country discuss opportunities with eco-tourism, non-timber forest products and sustainable forestry practices. Andy has used RREA funds to bring leading experts in production and marketing of American ginseng and goldenseal to Virginia. He has also used funds from RREA-USDA for further ginseng seed purchases and goldenseal root purchases. The seeds and planting roots were used to develop more field demonstrations with private landowners.

American ginseng is currently grown on over 600 privately-owned woodlots in Virginia. Nearly all of these landowners use the wild-simulated method of growing ginseng. These naturalized populations of ginseng are growing throughout the mountains and throughout the Northern Piedmont Counties in carefully selected sites. Naturalized populations of ginseng are also growing quite well in certain micro-environments throughout the Southern Piedmont region of Virginia. American ginseng certainly does not grow well in the Tidewater region of Virginia. Andy Hankins believes that privately owned forestland which is used for production of American ginseng is less likely to be sold for development than forestland which does not contain valuable herbaceous crops. He would like to encourage other professionals who work in agriculture and forestry to join in this effort to protect our forests by adding value to woodlands with American ginseng.