

## The ‘Gilfeather’ Turnip: A Vermont Heirloom Variety

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August 2018



*Although there's still some debate about whether the 'Gilfeather' is truly a turnip, there's no question that the vegetable is steeped in Vermont history.*

*Courtesy Friends of the Wardsboro Library*

What began as a school project became formal legislation when the students and teachers of Wardsboro Elementary successfully lobbied their state government to make the ‘Gilfeather’ turnip Vermont’s official vegetable. The turnip had long been a Vermont favorite, but it wasn’t until 2016 that the governor signed a bill proclaiming its new status. And though there’s still some debate about what the root vegetable actually is — it’s the shape of a rutabaga, but white like a turnip, with a taste that’s a cross between the two — there’s no question that the ‘Gilfeather’ is steeped in Vermont history. The current owners of the original Gilfeather Farm, located on Gilfeather Road in Wardsboro, Vermont, still grow a patch of ‘Gilfeather’ turnips each season.

The first record of this heirloom vegetable dates back to the early 1900s, when Wardsboro farmer John Gilfeather began bringing the bulbous, sweet turnips to market. They became so popular that it’s said Gilfeather would put notices in newspapers to announce his crops were available for sale, advising they should be preordered because they were going to sell out. There was nothing else like it, and there couldn’t be; Gilfeather cut the tops and roots off each

of the thousands of turnips he sold, ensuring that no buyers could propagate the plant for themselves.

Because of this secrecy, no one knows precisely where the unusual turnip came from. Was the first harvest a happy accident? Is the vegetable a European import whose origin Gilfeather never revealed? The Friends of the Wardsboro Library believe the most likely explanation is that, with care and no shortage of horticultural talent, Gilfeather hybridized the unique cultivar himself. The questions about the plant’s origin continue into the present day, because even now there’s debate about whether the heirloom can truthfully be called a “turnip.”

### One Rare Root Vegetable

Bulky and softball-sized, the ‘Gilfeather’ grows to look like a rutabaga, complete with leaves the color and shape of rutabaga greens. However, rather than the traditional yellowish color of rutabagas, the flesh of the vegetable is white like a turnip. When allowed to go to seed, the growing ‘Gilfeather’ has the close-branched architecture of a turnip, with flowers more like those of a rutabaga — but unlike either plant, there’s no purple top on this root vegetable. The ‘Gilfeather’ conspicuously lacks the expected “bite” of a turnip or rutabaga; instead, its taste is mild, sweet, and delightfully creamy. When officially tested, the University of Vermont claimed that the ‘Gilfeather’ is indeed genetically a turnip, but still the debate continues, with some seed companies listing the plant under their “rutabaga” category.

The seemingly impossible task of categorizing the ‘Gilfeather’ is of no consequence to Wardsboro. Toward the end of every October, after the first hard frost that gives the vegetable its characteristic sweetness, the town holds their annual ‘Gilfeather’ Turnip Festival. Started as a fundraiser by the Friends of the Wardsboro Library, the event has grown into a proud celebration full of ‘Gilfeather’ turnip recipes; craft vendors selling turnip-themed clothing and housewares; a contest with categories for everything, from the biggest turnip to the turnip with the best name; and of course, a chance to buy seeds and ‘Gilfeather’ turnips to take home.

This event is made possible because, despite John Gilfeather's best efforts at secrecy, some of the seeds from his famous root vegetable made it into the hands of friends and neighbors. Gilfeather died in 1944, and it's unclear whether he willingly gave away the secrets of the turnip before he died.

What we know is that in 1977, a neighbor, Clifford Emery, happened to give a couple named Mary Lou and Bill Schmidt a small bottle of seeds that could be traced back to John Gilfeather's famous crop. After growing the seeds and discovering vast consumer interest in the resulting vegetable, Mary Lou had the seeds tested and finally registered as an heirloom variety at the State Department of Agriculture. The Schmidts trademarked the "Gilfeather" name in 1984, ensuring the turnip would be associated with the farmer who made it famous.

Today, the 'Gilfeather' enterprise is not the exclusive right of any one seed company, so seeds are available for purchase through several sources (see "Buy 'Gilfeather' Turnip Seeds," below). The turnips are also in Slow Food USA's "Ark of Taste" catalog — a list of regionally adapted (and often endangered) rare plants, animals, and foods. John Gilfeather may not have wanted his secret crop shared, but through festivals, legislation, and the pride of Wardsboro, his legacy and his turnip live on.

## How to Grow the 'Gilfeather'

Plant your seeds 1/4 inch deep in rows 12 to 18 inches apart in loose, rich, well-drained soil. The 'Gilfeather' can tolerate partial shade, and should be watered moderately on a fairly frequent schedule.

For a spring crop, plant seeds as early as the ground can be prepared — typically three weeks before the season's last frost. For a fall crop, which most growers prefer for this biennial, plant seeds in late summer; they'll need about 85 days to mature before the first frost of fall. If you're new to the vegetable, plan on a fall crop — these turnips turn their high water content into phytochemicals and glucose to survive a hard frost, as sugar-water has a lower freezing point. When harvested after a frost, the 'Gilfeather' will have the full force of its characteristic sweetness.

'Gilfeather' leaves are good to use as cooked greens, but be careful not to harvest too many leaves from one plant or you'll kill the root, which may grow to be softball-sized, or much larger.

If an early hot spell hits your spring crop, taste-test the root daily and pull the entire crop at the first signs of deterioration. Your fall crop can be mulched over and left in the ground to harvest as needed during winter, but many gardeners prefer to gently dig up the turnips, twist off the tops (leaving about 1/2 inch of stem attached), and store in a cool, damp, dark place. 🌿