

The Gilfeather Turnip

A treasured vegetable comes to light in Vermont.

By Gordon Hayward

The turnip is generally regarded as a lowly vegetable. In the seed catalogs it is relegated to a fifth column near the back and is invariably preceded by page after splashy page of photographs of plump and very red tomatoes. Rarely is there a picture of a 'Purple Top' or 'Shogoin.' Even 'Tokyo Cross Hybrid' rarely gets his profile printed. Most people consider the turnip vulgar: put it in the stew and it becomes obtrusively so.

While the rest of us grow a row or two so that we can fill one serving dish at Thanksgiving dinner, a handful of gardeners in southeastern Vermont have been quietly raising turnips for 50 years. The variety they grow is called the Gilfeather turnip. Here's the story of this vegetable—a story that took me nearly four months to piece together.

One day, Al Lynch, a friend and fellow gardener, gave me a Gilfeather turnip. Not really liking turnip all that much, but please to have an indigenous Vermont vegetable, I took it home. After all, not many states can claim their own vegetable.

The unattractive oblong root had a rough skin, quite unlike that of a good 'Tokyo cross Hybrid.' I put it in the cellar and there it sat with the 'Hubbard' squash and potatoes for a week or more. Both my wife and I found it difficult to get excited about cooking the thing.

A week or so later I asked Al how best to cook it. He suggested boiling equal amounts of potato and turnip and then mashing them together. We did so, but before mixing them, we tasted the turnip and discovered that the white root had a delicious flavor. The texture was smooth and when mashed with spuds it further sweetened our already sweet 'Green Mountain' potatoes.

The next time I saw Al I told him how pleasantly surprised we were at the taste of his

turnip. He was not surprised; he's heard that same response time and time again I asked him where he bought the seeds. "Bought? I don't think you can buy them. I got mine from my brother-in-law up in Dummerston."

I casually asked around for a few weeks, hoping to come across seeds for sale somewhere. I asked a few friends in Brattleboro, but I couldn't help feeling from the response I got that it was like asking them for directions to the pool in the West River where they got that 16-inch trout. My curiosity was piqued.

I started asking around in earnest. People mentioned that they had gotten their seeds from a brother, an aunt in West Dover, an old guy in Guilford, a neighbor, or, "I can't remember. Seems as though there's been a jar seeds in the cellar for years."

Finally the trail got warm. I asked Ernie Clard, a gardener in lifetime resident of Vermont. He said, "Give Flossie Howe at Agway a call." I did. She wasn't in, but the man I spoke to suggested I get in touch with Mary Lou Schmidt, out in Dummerston. I did, and that was when the hard news started coming in.

One Saturday, at the Schmidts' invitation, I drove up to their 140-acre farm, in the hills a few miles north of Brattleboro. From the kitchen where we sat I could look out of their impeccably maintained 200-year-old Cape through an alley of black locusts and across a sloping hayfield into wooded hills and valleys that formed overlapping horizons far in the distance. It was the kind of landscape that attracted Rudyard Kipling, who is supposed to have said that his two favorite cities in the world or Bombay and Brattleboro.

Mary Lou Schmidt told me that she used to raise registered Morgan horses on the property before turning her attention to managing the farm, with its Christmas tree plantation, maple grove,



vegetable gardens, and timber and cordwood operations. One day in the spring of 1975, Cliff Emery, a neighbor, stopped by to see how the Schmidts' garden was doing. As so many of us do when we visit fellow gardeners in the spring, Mr. Emery took along a container of seeds; he thought the Schmidts might not have any Gilfeather turnips. He was right.

Like most people they weren't wild about turnip, but since Mary Lou and Bill appreciate a varied garden, they planted the tiny seeds, following Cliff's instructions, half an inch deep in mid July, and got what appeared to be 100% germination. Bill interrupted the story to say that the seeds grow virtually anywhere.

After the turnips had been sweetened by two or three October frosts, Bill brought a few in from the garden and they began to experiment with various ways of cooking them. They put chunks into stews and found that the Gilfeather added a subtle sweetness rather than the slightly bitter taste of most turnips. Mary Lou added, "I'll never make mashed potatoes without them again, and children like this turnip, too."

Mary Lou called Cliff Emery, hoping she could trace the development of the Gilfeather turnip. Cliff had lived in Dummerston for over 50 years; surely he would know where to buy seeds. But they were not for sale anywhere. One could only get them over the garden fence. According to Cliff, the turnips and seeds had been around southeastern Vermont for his long as he could remember.

Being enthusiastic farmers, the Schmidts wanted to promote the indigenous vegetable, and its rightful name for their state. They began a process by which they hope to have the vegetable registered as an official Vermont plant.

They started by investigating the history of the Gilfeather turnip. They got in touch with the present owner of Gilfeather Farm, in Wardsboro, Dr. Courtney Bishop, a retired professor of clinical surgery at Yale and Chief of Staff at Yale-New Haven Hospital. Bill asked Dr. Bishop what he knew about the Gilfeather family and the

turnip. Dr. Bishop recounted that the Gilfeather family came from County Fermanaugh, Ireland, by way of the sailing ship *Orient* out of Liverpool to New York. They arrived in March 1863, and went to stay with relatives in Manchester, Vermont. In 1870, they purchased the farm high above the village of Wardsboro. John Gilfeather was the eldest of the seven children. He never married but lived with his brother William in the family homestead.

Dr. Bishop said that no one who lives in Wardsboro knows how or when John developed the turnip. Some do remember, however, that he would drive a pair of horses down from his mountain farm one day late each October. The draft horses would be pulling a wagon whose bed was loaded to the brim with turnips. John would spend a long day driving the 60-mile round trip to Brattleboro and back to sell his crop. Because the turnip is biennial, those who bought the Gilfeather variety would store them in the cellar and replant them in the spring. By late July or early August the three-foot flower stalks would have produced hundreds of ripened seed pods.

John Gilfeather was a respected citizen and a successful farmer. He was a town selectmen as well as a representative from his district to the state legislature, in Montpelier. At the age of 73, he sold his farm to a professor of physics at Columbia University and move down to the village of Wardsboro, where he died of pneumonia in 1944 at the age of 79.



John Gilfeather

In the fall of 1979 the Schmidts were well into their trial plantings and had experienced complete success with germination. In fact, they had given Felix Blum, a friend from Guilford, a packet of seeds. A few weeks after planting them, Felix ran into Mary Lou. She asked how his turnip seeds had done. "Ninety-five percent germination—that's what you said, right? Well it's more like 150% I've got turnips all over the place." Knowing, too, that the turnip wintered over successfully under no more than a few inches of mulch, the Schmidts were more than ever convinced of the potential of this unique and delicately flavored turnip.

They wrote to the Department of Agriculture, in Montpelier, requesting information on how to market the seed and were directed to the University of Vermont, where their seeds were tested for purity of strain and percentage of germination. By early 1980 the Schmidts had fulfilled all the requirements of the Vermont Department of Weights and Measures and were allowed to market the seed, but only within the state. They could be sold under the name of Vermont Gilfeather turnip.

Mary Lou took the first 150 packets of seeds to Flossy Howe, at Agway. They were put on display in midwinter and sold out in 10 days. Before the end of April, the entire stock of seeds for the 1980 growing season was sold out.

Bill wrote a two-paragraph announcement for *Agriview*, a bulletin for Vermont farmers. The piece, entitled "Gilfeather Turnip seeds Available," brought immediate and enthusiastic responses from all over Vermont, New Hampshire, and upper New York State.

Greatly encouraged by this reaction, the Schmidts began looking into registering the plant with the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). They wrote to Washington and three days later received an enthusiastic phone call from an official of the Plant Variety and Protection Division; he was only too happy to help them apply for the registration of this "heirloom variety." Bill marveled at the efficient response

from the giant bureaucracy: "Washington was so helpful. I am encouraged to know that at least part of the federal bureaucracy can be personal, direct, and helpful."

A few days after the phone call, a packet of forms arrived in the mail. After submitting the completed forms, the Schmidts were required to send in a drawing of the plant and its root system, a field description, and a formal botanical description (with which the people at the University of Vermont help). Just after the plants formed mature seedpods, an entire specimen had to be pulled up and sent to Washington, along with a packet of seeds. They also sent Dr. Bishop's historical material on the Gilfeather family.

In October 1980, the Schmidts received a letter from the USDA: Mr. Gilfeather's turnip was indeed a unique vegetable. The plant specimen and seeds had been registered and sent to the vaults of the National Seed Storage Laboratory, in Fort Collins Colorado. This means that the Schmidts can now sell the seed nationwide. If you would like a 1.8 gram packet, send \$.75 and a self-addressed, stamped envelope to Elysian Hills, Dummerston, RFD1, Brattleboro, Vermont, 05301. **[No longer - see note at end about seeds, added 2015.]** The Schmidts are more than certain that this hardy and adaptable turnip can grow anywhere other turnips succeed.

After four months of searching for the story of this modest turnip, both my wife and I felt a kind of attachment to it and the people growing it. We had left only one leaf unturned: a visit to the Bishops and Gilfeather Farm.

One day this past February, during that remarkable thaw we had here in New England, we arranged to visit the Bishops. We drove to the village, only to be met in the valley by Dr. Bishop in his four-wheel-drive vehicle. "Pretty steep and muddy," we were warned. "Better come with me." We parked our car down by the Whetstone Brook Bridge and climbed into the sturdy Jeep. As the doctor drove up up the hill, the views got more and more breathtaking. After a few moments we

arrived at the farm perched on the hillside. We walked through the barn that had once been the stable for John's draft horses, and then stopped by a spring trickling from under a rock out cropping by the back door of the house. From where we stood, we could look down to the lower hayfields and Mrs. Bishop's reasonably level garden, and then out to the Windham Hills stretching into the distance. Or we could turn around and look up at the steeply sloping upper hayfields. "Not a square inch of level ground on the place, it seems," Dr. Bishop said. He should know; he's been cutting and baling hay on a tractor with half-tracks for 30 years.

Mrs. Bishop welcomed us into her home and, having placated our two-year-old son, Nathaniel, with a miniature woodstove and utensils, she launched into the story of her experiences with the turnip. In 1950, when she and Dr. Bishop bought the Gilfeather farm, she asked around for seeds of the turnip. She heard that a gardener in Newfane, 10 miles or so from Wardsboro, sold the turnips. She looked him up and asked if he would sell her some seeds. "No" was the reply. He would sell her some turnips, however. When she got home she discovered the tops and bottoms were so severely cut back that they could not possibly give rise to roots or flower stalks. A year or so later she discovered Leonna Cobb, who had worked for Mr. Gilfeather. Mrs. Cobb supplied her with some seeds, and now the Bishops raise five 90-foot rows of turnips in the very soil in which John Gilfeather grew them.

Every fall for years people have been driving up the dead-end dirt road to buy turnips by the bushel. "And you know," she continued, "even with all those rows I never have enough. They're awful looking things, but people sure do like them. By the way, don't ever cook them in aluminum; they turn gray."

We chatted about John Gilfeather, the farm, and its history, and then Mrs. Bishop added one last little teaser to a mystery I thought had been solved. A few years back she and Dr. Bishop were visiting their daughter and her family near

Wiesbaden, Germany. One day they were walking through a local market when she was pulled up short by the sight of what looked very much like Gilfeather turnips. She remembered that old time timers in Wardsboro had told her that John frequently referred to his turn up as a white, sweet German turnip. They bought one and cooked it for dinner. It tasted very much like the Gilfeather.

Clearly the next step for us is to fly to Wiesbaden to talk with the market gardeners in the area. But then, perhaps some reader can shed further light on this subject and save us the trip.

A frequent contributor, Gordon Hayward wrote "Filling in the Blanks: A Selection of Crops to Plant in July and August," in the July 1981 issue. When not gardening, he teaches high school English in Vermont.

[Note - the Schmidts sold the rights to sell the seeds to a local grower. Contact Dutton's Farm in Newfane, Vermont.]

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