

A turnip gets its day in the sun

by Mike Faher
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Wardsboro Elementary School students lobby state legislators this year to make the Gilfeather turnip the state vegetable. Photo courtesy of Friends of the Wardsboro Library

WARDSBORO — It's fair to say the Gilfeather turnip has achieved fame uncommon for a variety of root vegetable: There's a popular annual festival that bears its name, along with a recipe book, a song and even a movie.

Now, the Wardsboro-born turnip has another claim to fame after Vermont lawmakers designated it the official state vegetable as of July 1.

The honorary title culminates years of work by Gilfeather advocates, including a dedicated group of Wardsboro Elementary School students who made multiple trips to Montpelier to lobby for H.65. Aside from a boost in civic pride, some say a major benefit of the Gilfeather bill's success may be the pupils' hands-on learning experience in the state capital.



A Gilfeather Turnip Festival contest entry in 2014.

“So many folks feel disconnected from and disenfranchised by our lawmaking system,” said Rep. Laura Sibia, I-Dover. “This process helps students understand where they and their community have been and serves to empower them wherever they are going.”

Sibia's district includes Wardsboro, a town of 900 where bachelor farmer John Gilfeather started growing his namesake turnip more than a century ago. It remains a matter of debate whether the variety was imported from overseas or developed on site — via “happy accident” or careful, deliberate gardening.

There's no debate, though, about the Gilfeather turnip's enduring popularity. Devotees laud its size, hardiness and sweetness; one writer has praised the “sweet, mild taste of the Gilfeather even when it grows as big as a well-fed woodchuck.”

According to legend, John Gilfeather was so protective of his vegetable's exclusivity that he trimmed the turnips so customers couldn't grow their own.

Gilfeather died in 1944. Several decades later, Bill and Mary Lou Schmidt, of Dummerston — known in this area for their longtime Christmas tree business — trademarked the Gilfeather name and had the turnip government-certified as an “heirloom botanical.”

are much more widely available these days. One prominent though quick-selling display is at the Gilfeather Turnip Festival, held in October at Wardsboro Town Hall.

Hundreds attend every year. Among the prizes handed out last October were best name (Bernie); “wicked weirdest” (three turnips in one); and the grand champion (weighing 40.6 pounds).

The festival is the major fundraiser for Friends of the Wardsboro Library, the group responsible for maintaining and keeping the lights on at the town’s book repository. Mike Cooney, who chairs both the festival and the friends group, expects the Gilfeather’s new state honor to bring even more folks to Wardsboro this fall.

“We’ve already had contacts from (new) people who want to be food vendors at this year’s festival,” Cooney said. “So we’re actually going to put up a second food tent.”

The 15-month journey of H.65 proves that Wardsboro’s turnip already had a legion of fans before state legislators got involved. The effort actually got its start in northern Vermont, where a Franklin County resident with an interest in state symbols — and a taste for the Gilfeather — got in touch with Rep. Barbara Murphy, I-Fairfax.

Murphy became a sponsor of the state vegetable bill, along with Sibiliala and a handful of other House members. H.65 was introduced in January 2015, and Wardsboro students made their pitch not long after — but the bill didn’t really start moving until this year in the second half of the legislative biennium.

The diverse list of witnesses who offered testimony for H.65 includes several students and Wardsboro teacher Samantha Bovat; Reps. Murphy and Sibiliala; former Wardsboro Rep. John Moran; and other backers including a chef and a farm owner.

The bill passed the House on Jan. 20 and was approved by the Senate on April 29.

It’s a turnip lovers’ victory that no doubt would have made John Gilfeather — who also served a short stint in the Legislature — proud. Sibiliala cited the Gilfeather turnip’s “rich history in Vermont” and noted that Gilfeather’s farm still exists.

“Embracing our history and our small-town traditions is an important part of our identity as Vermonters,” she said.

Cooney draws a line from that history to today’s farm-to-table trends. “We’re all very interested in our food, so this is a locally grown product that we can all be proud of,” he said.

The Gilfeather is also, in Cooney’s estimation, “a unique vegetable to the state of Vermont.” He jokingly scoffed at previous efforts to name kale the state’s official vegetable.

“Kale can be grown just about anywhere,” Cooney said.

In a local announcement of H.65’s approval, Wardsboro sixth-graders mused on the long wait for legislative action; the practice needed for Gilfeather presentations; the fun of visiting the Statehouse; and the fact that Vermont is now the 14th state with an official vegetable.

To hear student Jesse Dykes tell it, spreading the good word about the Gilfeather was fairly easy.

“The hardest part of making the Gilfeather turnip the state vegetable was nothing, really,” he said. “As soon as someone said there was a Gilfeather turnip cookbook, one of the senators was sold.” 🌱