

# Happy Vermont®

## Explore Vermont

### The Roots of the Gilfeather Turnip Run Deep in Tiny Wardsboro

By Erica Housekeeper  
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Along a rugged dirt road in the southern Vermont town of Wardsboro is the old Gilfeather farm, where the famous Gilfeather turnip first sprouted in the early 1900s.

The turnip, cultivated by farmer John Gilfeather, became the official Vermont State Vegetable in 2016. It's celebrated every fall at the Gilfeather Turnip Festival in October. The festival, which started in 2002, draws visitors from around the region.



*-The turnip festival in Wardsboro started in 2002. Courtesy of Friends of the Wardsboro Library.*

After spending months putting together the 2021 event, organizers briefly pulled the plug on this year's festival because of rising COVID-19 cases. They reconsidered and decided to move forward with a smaller event instead.

“We just couldn't face not doing something to celebrate our funky turnip,” says Linda Gifkins, a member of the Friends of the Wardsboro Library and an organizer of the event.

The 2021 festival will feature Gilfeather turnip soup, bread and donut holes, as well as turnips by the pound, turnip-themed merchandise, a book sale, and kids' activities.



*-Farmer John Gilfeather of Wardsboro. Courtesy of Friends of the Wardsboro Library.*

#### The Early Days of the Gilfeather Turnip

The Backus family now owns the former Gilfeather farm. Honoring tradition, the family still grows a patch of turnips from seed on their land on Gilfeather Road, located off Vermont's Route 100.

Wardsboro resident Anita Rafael, a writer—and Gilfeather turnip enthusiast—describes the vegetable as part rutabaga and part turnip.

“It's sweet, and it's creamy, and it's not like that turnip that gives you that little choke in the back of your throat,” she told me as we toured the old Gilfeather farm in August. “What made the turnip famous in John Gilfeather's day was that he hybridized it. We don't know if it was a happy accident of nature or if he was truly some little hybridizing genius and figured out how to come up with a turnip that wasn't a turnip.”

As the story goes, John Gilfeather wasn't quite the sharing kind with his turnip technique.

“One of the things we know about John Gilfeather is that he really was possessive of not just the seeds, but the plant itself,” Rafael says. “If you have a turnip, you can actually grow another turnip because of the hairy roots and all that. To protect his turnip, John Gilfeather used to cut the tops off and shave off all the root hairs.”

Fortunately, the turnip didn’t disappear after his death in the 1940s. A few local farmers continued to grow the turnips, and in the 1970s, Bill and Mary Lou Schmidt of Dummerston trademarked the Gilfeather name and had the turnip government-certified as an “heirloom botanical.”

All these years later, Rafael says the turnip continues to serve Wardsboro well.

“We are the official town of the official Vermont state vegetable. There’s a tremendous amount of community pride, and it puts Wardsboro on the map,” Rafael says. “It makes us famous for something.” 🍂

## Erica Houskeeper

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Erica Houskeeper is a freelance writer and photographer based in Burlington, Vermont. Her family moved to Vermont in 1979, and she’s been calling the Green Mountains home ever since.

Erica began her career in Vermont as a newspaper reporter, covering small towns around the state. She later became director of communications for the Vermont Department of Tourism and Marketing, where she shared her expertise with journalists and travelers from around the world.

Erica started Happy Vermont in 2009 to share tips about exploring Vermont, and she launched Happy Vermont’s podcast in 2020. Erica has been interviewed about Vermont and featured in several media outlets, including the Huffington Post, Food & Wine, The Boston Globe, Vermont Public, The Burlington Free Press, WPTZ/NBC5, WDEV, and Seven Days.

She is a board member of The 251 Club.