

Wardsboro 'Roots' For Gilfeather Turnip

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The local food movement doesn't get any more local than in the West River Valley town of Wardsboro, population 854. The town's claim to fame is a turnip called the Gilfeather. The fleshy white roots are named for the Wardsboro farmer who first grew them. They're prized for their mild, sweet taste.

In a country town like Wardsboro, people learn to make the best of whatever they've got. That might explain the local enthusiasm for the Gilfeather Turnip festival. It's held every fall to celebrate the local delicacy.

Wardsboro native son Jim Knapp tells the turnip's history in a song:

*Well back in eighteen-hundred whatever
A man came along by the name of Gilfeather
He brought along some turnip seeds
And put them in the ground
And that's how the Gilfeather turnip
Came to our tiny town....*

The festival draws both visitors and locals to Wardsboro's town center. There are crafts vendors and musicians, turnip cookbooks and mugs. There's a competition for the ugliest turnip, and the biggest -- 25 pounds this year.

Near the town hall there's a turnip cart, piled high with the bulbous white roots. People crowd around to buy them.

Chris Tarnay weighs the turnips for the customers and dispenses advice.

"You know, you can chop these greens for food like you do spinach," she tells a customer. "Just put it in a vase of water and they'll freshen right up."

Upstairs in the town hall, there's a sit-down meal. The menu includes turnip casserole, turnip cole slaw, turnip mashed potatoes, even turnip bread and donuts.

Helen Eddy loves the turnip soup. She says she makes it at home.

"I grow my own turnips," she says.

The festival brings in thousands of dollars each year for the Friends of the Wardsboro Library. Turnips have been a source of revenue in Wardsboro for a long time. Carol Bishop Backus lives on the hill farm where John Gilfeather grew his famous crop.

"He would take horse and wagon-loads of turnips down to Brattleboro to sell," Backus says. She says Gilfeather guarded his cash crop closely.

“There’s a story that John didn’t want anybody else to be able to grow the turnip,” she says. “So he would not only cut off the tops but he cut off the roots, because if the roots are gone you can not plant it the next year and grow your own seeds.”

He must have given some seeds away because other farmers in the region had them too. But for many years the only way to get Gilfeather seeds was from someone else who grew them.

In the 1980s, a Dummerston couple packaged some seeds from Gilfeathers they were given by a neighbor, and sold them at the Brattleboro Agway.

Now Gilfeather seeds are available from a number of catalogues. Most of them are grown by Newfane farmer and farm stand operator Paul Dutton. Dutton says he doesn’t make much money from the seeds -- the turnips themselves are a different story. He grows thousands of pounds each season.

He says they’re sweeter in the cold. Well into November, most of his turnips are still in the field their round tops sticking out of the soil.

On a recent walk through his fields, Dutton chooses a soccer-ball-sized turnip growing close to two smaller ones. He holds the smaller turnips down with his boot and pulls up the one he wants.

“You just yank it out, like that.”

Gladys Bruce, a 94-year-old Wardsboro resident, may be the only person living who actually remembers John Gilfeather.

“Of course,” she chuckles. “He and my father were great friends! I was a little kid. He never paid any attention to me.”

Bruce doesn’t know for sure whether John Gilfeather gave the seeds to her father. But she says Gilfeather turnips were a staple in her family. She remembers thinning the sprouts as a little girl. The best-looking turnips were set aside for market.

“We took good care of them,” she says. “We sold them in the fall when they were large, and took the money to pay the taxes.”

The smallest roots went to the cows.

“We had a turnip grinder,” Bruce says. “We used to grind them up, and oh! The cows just loved them. When we was grinding they’d bellow and bellow. They wanted those turnips. “

Bruce would often grab a bit of turnip from the grinder for herself. They’re tasty raw, she says. But boiled with butter and salt, she says they’d beat potatoes any day. 🌿



Susan Keese was VPR's southern Vermont reporter, based at the VPR studio in Manchester at Burr & Burton Academy. After many years as a print journalist and magazine writer, Susan started producing stories for VPR in 2002. From 2007-2009, she worked as a producer, helping to launch the noontime show Vermont Edition. Susan has won numerous journalism awards, including two regional Edward R. Murrow Awards for her reporting on VPR. She wrote a column for the Sunday Rutland Herald and Barre-Montpelier Times Argus. Her work has appeared in Vermont Life, the Boston Globe Magazine, The New York Times and other publications, as well as on NPR.