

## It's Turnip Time Again

By Anita Rafael  
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Who doesn't love a story that starts with "*Once upon a time ...*"? This is a good one because it begins with a farmer in Vermont, includes a very unusual vegetable, and ties in a small town that was in dire need of funds for its public library.

Here goes —

Once upon a time, in the early 1900s, a bachelor farmer named John Gilfeather from Wardsboro, Vermont, made quite a name for himself growing and selling turnips.

But not just any turnips — his were special. Not exactly magical, but definitely different.

There's a bit of a mystery as to how Farmer Gilfeather came to be the only one cultivating a type of exceptionally sweet and creamy root vegetable. He never said whether he secretly imported seeds from elsewhere to his hardscrabble farmland, or whether he experimented in his own fields by cross-pollinating different varieties of turnips, and possibly some rutabagas, to hybridize this rare turnip.



John Gilfeather. Photo courtesy Gilfeather Farm.

Each year, after autumn's first hard frost, Farmer Gilfeather carted wagon loads of his turnips to market. (It tastes much sweeter when it stays in the ground during a hard frost or two.) Wardsboro residents, some of whom can recall meeting old Gilfeather, say that before selling his crop, he patiently sliced the leafy tops and hairy roots off each turnip, one by one, so that no one else could propagate it and harvest those precious seeds.



John Gilfeather at work on his farm in Wardsboro. Photo courtesy of the Wardsboro History Group.

Grocers who carried Gilfeather's prized turnips in those days placed notices in regional newspapers to assure shoppers that the turnips in their stores were the *true* Gilfeathers.

Now, crank the clock forward many decades. In 1999, the members of a small nonprofit group called the Friends of the Wardsboro Library desperately needed funds to remodel a 19th-century farmhouse that they had purchased, which was to be made into the town's new library. Someone thought of old John Gilfeather and his unusual turnip, and an idea was floated to forego those tried-and-true bake sales and instead throw a party for the town's nearly forgotten vegetable as a fundraiser. Why not?

The first festival was held in 2002, so this year's event on Saturday, Oct. 28 is the 15th rendition of the Gilfeather Turnip Festival. Each time this fun, family celebration gets bigger and better. Now, more than 1,000 pounds of genuine Gilfeather Turnips are trucked in for the affair. The volunteer-run festival invites farmers, food producers, and culinary-related craftspeople to fill two big tents, plus many small pop-up tents and open-air displays, on Main Street in Wardsboro. The Turnip Café, Turnip Boutique, additional booths, and entertainers on stage take up both floors in the big Town Hall.



In a word, the entire Gilfeather Turnip Festival is a hoot. You would expect that the highlight of the event would be the superb Gilfeather Turnip dishes made by Wardsboro's cooks and served in the Turnip Café. That's a big draw, to be sure, but for most people, the kicker of the entire day is always the Turnip Contest. Farmers, home gardeners, and little children with big green thumbs may enter their Gilfeathers in any one of the many categories in the contest — largest grown in town or out of town, largest grown from seed, funniest name, and so on. It's free to enter a Gilfeather in the competition, and the winners get prize ribbons, and, of course, bragging rights for a whole year.

Farmer John Gilfeather died in 1944, and his gravesite is in a cemetery on a high hill right in the middle of town. From up there, you have a good view of Main Street where the festival honoring Gilfeather's turnip takes place, and you can watch the people lining up at the Turnip Cart to buy locally-grown organic turnips. Looking down at the festivities in the little village, and across to the Green Mountain National Forest beyond, you can also enjoy the waning colors of the autumn leaves that might not yet have fallen.

In Vermont's history books, Wardsboro isn't famous for much — it's just a quiet town of some 850 souls. If it wasn't for one hardworking and clever farmer, his popular and tasty turnip, and a group of library ladies with an ingenious fundraising idea, who knows if anyone would ever stop there?

This story has a threefold happy ending — first, the town's library is thriving, and even expanding, with the profits from the annual turnip fest. Second, more and more people are discovering that the heirloom Gilfeather Turnip is utterly delicious (unlike ordinary turnips that may have a bitter bite to them). Fine dining restaurants as far away as Washington, D.C., have added Gilfeather Turnip dishes to their menus. Third, and most remarkable of all, in the midst of all this hoop-dee-doo every October about singing turnip songs, wearing turnip t-shirts, eating turnip soup, touting turnip cookbooks, and entering turnip contests, Farmer John Gilfeather's turnip was named Vermont's official State Vegetable in 2016. Wardsboro is finally on the map!

Oh, P.S.! As you drive into town on scenic Route VT-100, either from the north or the south, you'll see a large "Welcome to Wardsboro" sign. One guess what vegetable is on it! 🍷