

# Gilfeather turnip — the Vermont state vegetable?

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When I was a child growing up in southern Vermont, my family would frequent a local restaurant that had paper placemats with a map of the state of Vermont depicted in the center surrounded by pen-and-ink sketches of various symbols, like the state flower of Vermont, the state bird of Vermont, the state animal of Vermont and so on.

For those of you who don't know or who once knew but have forgotten, the Vermont state flower is the red clover, the state bird is the hermit thrush, the state animal is the Morgan horse and the state tree is ... yes, you guessed it, the sugar maple.

One symbol I do not recall seeing on these menus was the Vermont state vegetable. "Wait, is there such a thing as state vegetables?" you are no doubt asking. The answer is yes, some states have state vegetables. (About 37 do, while approximately 13 do not.) Texas has the sweet onion, Louisiana has the Creole tomato, New Hampshire the white potato. And Vermont? Vermont has ... drum roll ... wait for it ... the Gilfeather turnip.

I only learned about the Gilfeather turnip and its recent ascension to glory a few Sundays ago when a friend at church happened to mention that she had played a small but significant part in the process.

Barbara Murphy, a state representative serving Fairfax since 2014, happened to be making Gilfeather turnip soup (you can't make this stuff up) when I called her Friday afternoon seeking more details about this interesting and new (to my mind) development in our state's history.

"You are making soup with Gilfeather turnips right now?" I asked her. "Yes," she said, going on to explain that she was cooking up a pot for an upcoming friends' reunion. "Where did you get them?" I asked. "At the turnip festival," she said.

"Tell me more," I said.

Turns out, in her freshman term as a legislator, Barbara had a constituent who came to her, perturbed because someone had tried to suggest that kale be made the Vermont state vegetable. I did a little research and saw that yes, indeed, in 2012 three senators—Anthony Pollina, David Zuckerman and Bill Doyle—introduced a bill titled "An Act Relating to Designating Kale as the State Vegetable." But it didn't seem to have taken root (so to speak), because the slot for state vegetable was empty when Barbara wrote up the bill proposing the Gilfeather turnip. "You can look it up," she told me. "H 65."

Laura Sibilina was the co-sponsor of the bill, which was appropriate, as she hales from Wardsboro, the town that put the Gilfeather turnip on the map. It took two years to move the bill along, Barbara said, during which time Wardsboro Elementary School students made enthusiastic presentations to both the

house and senate agricultural committees in support of it.

“People had fun with it,” Barbara said. “They would put turnips on state house windowsills and in common rooms; the chair of House Agriculture also grew them and offered them out.”

But now, why a turnip, you may be asking. And why this particular turnip? Well, this turnip because, unlike kale, it is a vegetable that actually originated in Vermont — a true Vermont heirloom root crop.

The story goes like this: John Gilfeather, a secretive man, and a farmer (and briefly, in 1908, a state legislator) was the first to grow this special turnip in the late 1800s — and once he had done so, he did everything he could think of to protect the strain. Before selling his turnips, he would fastidiously trim off the tops and roots so that no one would be able to grow them for themselves.

In this way, he kept the Gilfeather turnip a true strain until the 1970s when, many years after his death, a couple by the name of Schmidt managed to get their hands on some of the coveted seeds, which they eventually got trademarked and officially certified as an heirloom botanical. The trademark was allowed to lapse in 1995.

The Gilfeather turnip, I learned, is a cross between a rutabaga (*Brassica napus*) and a true turnip (*Brassica rapa*). Apparently, these types of crosses are fairly rare.

I asked Barbara what the Gilfeather turnip looks like. “Knobby and incredibly ugly,” she said. “And the taste?” I asked.

“It’s like a cross between a rutabaga and a turnip, but not as sharp as either one of

those,” she said, adding, “It’s a little bit sweet.”

“It’s a true Vermont product because it takes a winter and a hard frost to have it be the right flavor. And it truly originated in Vermont.”

Apparently, when cooked or mashed the color and texture of our new state vegetable looks rather like mashed potatoes.

“How big is it?” I asked.

“It ranges in size,” Barbara told me, as she stirred her cauldron of turnip soup (this is the image I had in my mind’s eye; I couldn’t actually see her, as we were speaking on the phone). The turnips she had on hand were about 4 or 5 pounds each, but the Wardsboro Festival holds an annual contest for the biggest turnip, and she told me she thinks she’s heard tell of one that was over 30 pounds.

I later discovered that, indeed, the Gilfeather turnip (*Brassica napus* x *rapa*) is known as being sweeter than most rutabagas. The greens are also tender and sweet. If you want to grow some, they need to be planted in mid-summer, just like other rutabagas. But this turnip is white, rather than yellow inside, and known to have a creamy, sweet flavor, setting it apart from more sharp-tasting varieties. And Barbara was right, the best flavor is apparently after frost.

I am now intrigued. Though I am not a cook, I am somewhat of a turnip/rutabaga aficionado. Back in the day, I used to throw one in a plastic grocery bag, put it in the microwave for about 15-20 minutes, then peel the plastic off the waxed skin (usually getting my fingers burned in the process, not to mention melted hot wax and plastic on my kitchen counter), then I would simply

slice and eat it. Delicious. But don't listen to me. There are many more efficient, refined and less messy and dangerous ways to enjoy turnips. The internet is full of them.

I read that the most recent annual Gilfeather Turnip Festival was held Saturday, Oct. 22. I am sorry I missed it. I am most definitely going to try and make the next one. I hear the whole town turns out at the Wardsboro Public Library, where there are locally grown Gilfeather turnips for sale, along with T-shirts, aprons, cookbooks and even little hand-knitted turnip caps for kids and eccentric adults.

So, let's raise a glass to the (fairly) newly crowned Vermont state vegetable, the Gilfeather turnip. May its reign be long and an inspiration to all of us! 🍂