

# The Granby Drummer

## Portrait of a Gilfeather

By Faith Tyldsley  
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### The story of a turnip: a big turnip from a little town.

#### State Capitals, Symbols, and Icons

In 5th grade we had to learn each state's capital and official nickname. We didn't know that beyond Juneau, Alaska, (The Last Frontier) and Baton Rouge, Louisiana (the Pelican State), there existed all manner of state symbols and icons.

Some symbols such as flags, seals and birds have been chosen and designated by state legislatures. Others, such as Maine's state crustacean (the lobster), Massachusetts' state dog (the Boston Terrier) and Georgia's state song (*Georgia On My Mind*), have been adopted through sustained effort by citizen's determined grass roots activity.

The more unusual state symbols have often been generated by students as class projects. In May 2007, the cowboy boot was recognized as an icon of Texas. A social studies teacher in Houston and her 7th grade students championed the boot for a year, and following the legal process required for a bill to become a law. Their efforts ultimately elevated that lowly boot to the Official State Footwear of Texas.

The Alaskan Malamute was designated Alaska's official state dog in 2010 thanks to the efforts of elementary students in Anchorage. They made their case in part by pointing out that Malamutes have been a partner in human survival for centuries, as a work dog, a guard dog, but also as a babysitter; remaining with Inuit children while parents were on hunts and allowing babies to snuggle up with their puppies for warmth.

#### State Vegetables

Who knew that states have official state vegetables? Well, not all states, but enough to make it a thing. Just for fun, here's the current list: Arkansas—South Arkansas vine ripe tomato, Georgia—Vidalia sweet onion, Idaho—Idaho Potato, Illinois—Sweet corn, Louisiana—Sweet potato, New Hampshire—White potato, New Mexico—Chile and pinto bean, North Carolina—Sweet potato, Oklahoma—Watermelon, South Carolina—Collard greens, Texas—Sweet onion, Utah—Spanish sweet onion, Vermont—Gilfeather turnip, Washington—Walla Walla sweet onion.

## Back to Connecticut–Holcomb Farm Veggies

On April 11, I took a half-hour reprieve from sheltering-in-place to pick up veggies at Holcomb Farm. According to Farmer Joe's email earlier in the week, this was the last winter pickup before Holcomb Farm's CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) transitioned to working full time on the coming season. "Wear gloves and a face covering while at the CSA Barn," the email directed.

Unlike other pickups, produce was already packed into high-quality hunter-green cloth bags stamped *Holcomb Farms CSA and Farm Store*.

The Covid-19 virus killed the fun of handpicking one's vegetables from among piles in large bins. I knew I was getting carrots, potatoes, turnips and spinach because they had been staples. This time, there was a pre-packed bag. A sign assured that "All bags will be a good value and be full of pleasant surprises."



Back home, an outlier lay at the bottom of the bag; a bulbous lump the size of a cantaloupe. A root vegetable gone rogue had fallen into my bag by mistake. I put it in the sink, took a photo and texted Farmer Joe, "What is this?"

Within minutes, the reply, "Gilfeather Turnip. Treat like a turnip."

## The Gilfeather Turnip: Vermont's State Vegetable

Wardsboro, Vermont (settled circa 1779) is a town with a population under 1,000. What began as a school project by 5th and 6th grade students at Wardsboro Elementary School became formal legislation when the Gilfeather turnip was designated as Vermont's Official State Vegetable by Governor Peter Shumlin on July 1, 2016.

Although it has come down through folklore as a turnip, the Gilfeather is really an interspecies cross (*Brassica napus x Brassica rapa*) between a rutabaga and a true turnip. What Mother Nature did not grant in good looks, she made up for by eliminating the expected "bite" of a turnip or rutabaga, bestowing instead a taste described as "mild, sweet and creamy."

Wardsboro farmer John Gilfeather (1865-1944) is recognized for the existence of this particular turnip in the early 1900s. He brought his turnips to market by horse and wagon, assiduously protecting the turnip's propagation by anyone but himself by cutting the tops and scraping off the roots of every one of the thousands of turnips he sold.

Despite Gilfeather's secrecy, some of the coveted seeds escaped his protected fields. Subsequent testing resulted in the Gilfeather being registered as an heirloom vegetable, a designation for vegetables (as well as flowers and fruits) that are grown from seeds that have been passed down from generation to generation.

The Gilfeather name was trademarked in 1984, ensuring the turnip would be forever associated with the farmer who made it famous.

## 2020

### The 18th Annual Gilfeather Turnip Festival

At the end of October, after the first hard frost that gives the vegetable its characteristic sweetness, the annual Gilfeather Turnip Festival turns a turnip into a rock star.

Originated by and currently overseen by the Friends of the Wardsboro Library, the festival is its primary fundraiser. Earnings support library maintenance: heating, electricity, snowplowing and insurance.

[ The 2020] festival will be held on Saturday, Oct. 24, from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m., “...rain, snow or shine.” There will be 1,000-plus pounds of Gilfeathers for sale, as well as seed packets, apples, cider, organic veggies, breads, honey, Vermont products and specialty foods. Contestants competing for the largest Gilfeather turnip prize will endure jittery nerves waiting for the coveted award’s announcement. (The 2019 winner weighed in at 30.8 pounds.) More people will visit the festival than live in Wardsboro itself.

The 3rd Edition of *The Gilfeather Turnip Cookbook*, a Friends of the Wardsboro Library fundraising publication, will be available for \$20. Several of the book’s recipes will be offered at the Turnip Cafe during the festival, the most popular being the Gilfeather turnip soup. This creamy, sweet soup (created by Greg Parks, former chef at the Four Columns Inn in Newfane, Vt.) has become the signature dish of the festival. It is definitely a dish for our time, equally stress buster (lots of chopping), and comfort food—soothingly smooth. 🌿

