

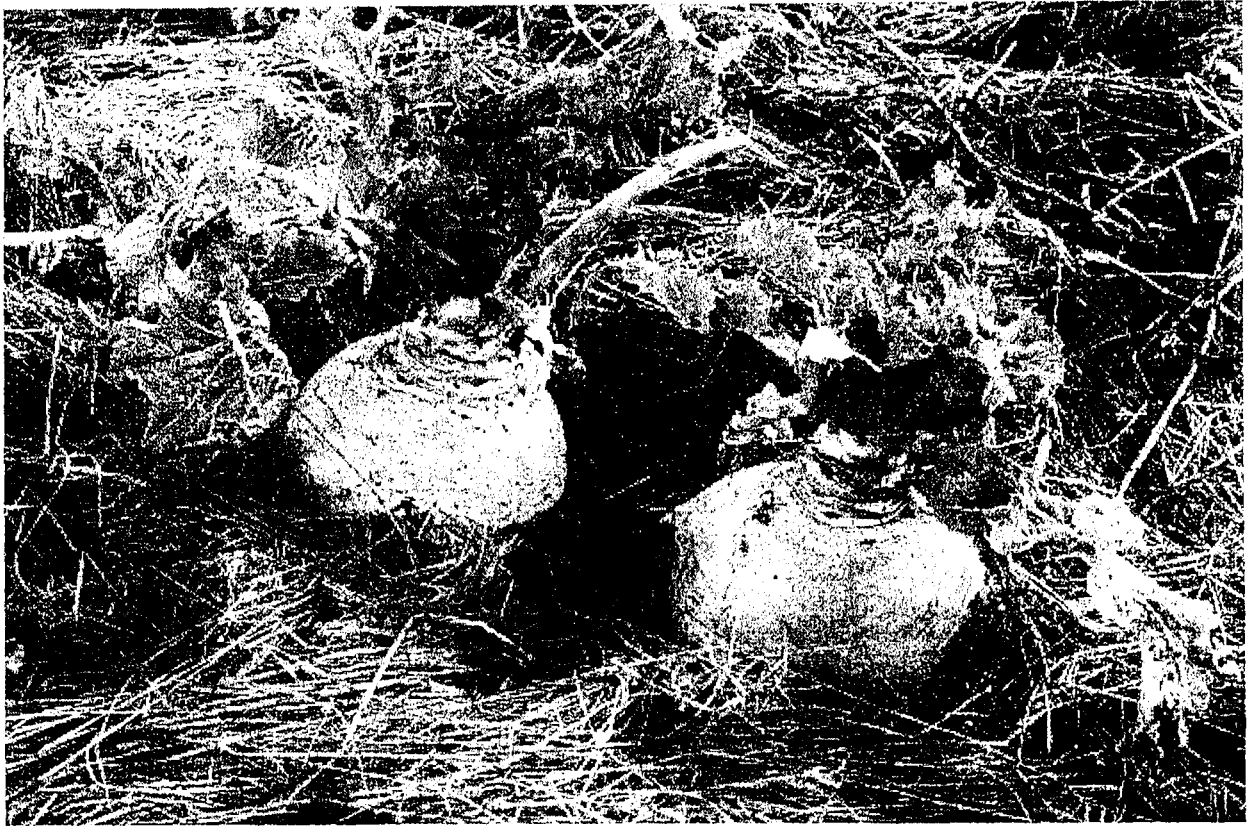
Lopez Island Kitchen Gardens

TAG ARCHIVES: GILFEATHER TURNIP SEEDS

Gilfeather Turnips

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Vegetable seed catalogs tempt us with descriptions of taste, beauty, productivity, and occasionally an intriguing story or bit of seed history. It was a story that drew me to Gilfeather turnips a decade ago, and I'm glad it did. I've continued grow this truly delicious root in each winter's kitchen garden and as an added treat I've watched its story grow too.



In Fedco Seed Company's 2005 version, the Gilfeather turnip was "either developed or discovered by John Gilfeather (1865-1944) of Wardsboro, VT in the late 1800s." Selling them in local markets, "Gilfeather, a lanky secretive man, is said to have cut the tops and bottoms off his turnips, so that no one else could propagate them. Nevertheless, some seeds escaped to a neighbor who gave them to market growers William and Mary Lou Schmidt, who salvaged, then commercialized the variety." In addition to this story, the description claimed that Gilfeather is "sweeter and later to mature than other turnips, not woody even at softball size, tastes better after frost" and that its "tender, mild, spineless greens" are also delicious. And in a technical detail, it noted: "this heirloom has come down in folklore as a turnip but is really a rutabaga."

Over the years, the catalog descriptions kept up with the Gilfeather story adding the information that it is now listed in the Slow Food Ark of Taste and leading off for the last several years with the reminder that: "At the end of October each year, Wardsboro hosts a festival at which all the dishes served feature its famous vegetable." I haven't been to this event but several years ago when I was in Vermont in early October I spotted a poster for the Gilfeather Turnip Festival. Then recently I found a 23-minute documentary: *The Gilfeather Turnip: Rooted in Wardsboro*. It's definitely worth watching, even if you don't like turnips. There's also a great recent newspaper article: "Turnip festival sprouts again at end of month." If the film and article tempt you to plant Gilfeather turnips, Fedco carries the seed and this year I noticed that Wild Garden Seeds in Oregon offers them too.

Vermonters plant their Gilfeather turnips in the spring for harvest and cold storage in late October, but in my temperate Pacific Northwest marine climate I plant them in mid-to-late July, spacing them about eight inches apart in rows two feet apart, and begin harvesting them after a few good frosts and then on through the winter.

They grow to at least softball size and often much larger, but they remain sweet and tender even at the larger sizes. If really cold weather is forecast, I mulch them heavily with straw up to the leafy tops. I love the roots that I love, but New Englanders harvest the greens too. As one gardener wrote to Fedco: "We have been harvesting the greens all fall and into the winter. It is now the end of January and we have been digging the leaves out from under the snow. They have no frost/freeze damage whatsoever, and are even hardier than Red Russian and Beedy's Camden kales. Plus they get sweeter after frost."



Vermonters eat the Gilfeather roots peeled, boiled and then mashed and while Gilfeathers are good that way I prefer cutting the peeled roots into chunks, brushing them with a little olive oil and roasting them at about 400

degrees so the sugars caramelize as the roots soften. Boiled or roasted, the flavor is like a more delicate, sweeter rutabaga. The pungent, earthy rutabaga taste lingers but there is also a hint of sweet spring turnips. I serve them warm as a side dish, alone or mixed with other roasted roots, or add room-temperature pieces to winter salads of kale, mustard or mache. I've also pureed them into soups, using vegetable or meat stock and perhaps a little cream. I can't imagine winter without them.



I'm grateful to John Gilfeather for this delicious winter root and to the people who've kept the seed and the story alive. I might have been tempted to grow Gilfeathers by descriptions of taste and hardiness alone but the story has been a delightful bonus and something to remember as I plant, harvest and cook this Vermont heirloom turnip.

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