



The secret's out: for a tastier turnip, try the Gilfeather

By Peter Tonge

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BRATTLEBORO, VT — About a century ago John Gilfeather did something for the world's gardeners that never became widely known much beyond this town and its southern Vermont environs. Mary Lou and Bill Schmidt, along with the Vermont Bean Seed Company, are hoping to add to his reputation in a hurry. Apparently Gilfeather was a great gardener -- and a lover of turnips in particular. But not content with what he was growing, he crossed several turnip varieties until he found one that tasted much better than any other. It was so sweet and light when cooked that neighbors in the region quickly coined a name for the dish: "Angel feathers."

Once it was established beyond doubt that Mr. Gilfeather had developed perhaps the best-tasting turnip around, friends and neighbors began requesting seeds for themselves. But this small coterie of growers kept the secret of this sweet-tasting turnip largely to themselves. Apparently no effort was ever made to commercialize the Gilfeather until the Schmidts stumbled across "this remarkable turnip" in 1978 and decided the world could wait no longer.

That year the Schmidts, who run a Christmas tree farm here and raise asparagus commercially, were given some Gilfeather seeds by a friend. They quickly realized that an outstanding heirloom variety would disappear forever should the handful of growers who saved seed from year to year decide to call it quits.

No one, however, can simply start producing seed and offer it for sale without first registering the name with the US Department of Agriculture. To do that the Schmidts had to prove that the Gilfeather was, indeed, unique in itself and not merely a strain of an existing variety. It took several years to get this done, but finally "Gilfeather" is a registered variety and can be sold as such.

Now, as authorized growers of Gilfeather seed, Mary Lou and Bill Schmidt have granted distribution rights in the United States to the Vermont Bean Seed Company of Bomoseen, Vt., and overseas through the British company Thompson & Morgan, whose US offices are in Jackson, N.J.

Last year Vermont Bean Seed Company president Guy Thomas sent out seed samples to selected customers with the request that they try out the new-old turnip variety. Back came some of the most fulsome praise for a vegetable that Mr. Thomas has ever received. "Unexpectedly delicate and sweet" and "surprisingly pleasant" are typical of the responses. One cook said it this way: "It [the Gilfeather] raises the turnip from basic ordinariness to something where only superlatives apply."

The Gilfeather can be eaten in scores of different ways. A Vermont preference is to mix the sweet turnip with mashed potatoes. The combination is a flavor-filled dish described as "deeply satisfying" by some who have tried it.

Turnips taste best if growth is rapid. They also thrive in soils enriched with compost or well-rotted manure to which a sprinkling of rock phosphate has been added. Sow no more than a quarter of an inch deep, 2 to 3 inches apart, in rows 15 inches apart. Use early thinnings as greens, leaving final spacing at 6 inches.

The Gilfeather can be eaten at 2-1/2 inches in diameter, but it is considerably larger at maturity. It can be sown as either a spring or fall crop. Most Vermonters sow their principal crop in late July and harvest after the first light frost. Turnips left in the ground over winter will produce seed the following spring.