

Vermont History from a Curious Root!

Solving the Gilfeather Turnip Mystery: Clues for Middle Grade Vermont Historians, Cooks & Gardeners

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This is a series of clues that combines local Vermont history, nutrition facts, and garden observation to engage middle grade students Vermont with the Vermont State vegetable, the Gilfeather turnip as it grows from seedling to harvest.

Gilfeather Turnip Garden Clue Quest

Audience: Middle grade students in Montpelier, Vermont

Context: Vermont State History, Agriculture, Sustainability, Nutrition, Volunteer Gardening programs

Purpose: To learn about the history, nutrition, and growth of the Gilfeather turnip while tending the garden

Clue 1: The Vermont Veggie with a Secret

🗨️ Clue:

"My colors are white and purple and I have kind of rough-skinned,

But don't call me *just* a turnip, that would be a sin!

I was born in Vermont, in a quiet town fair,

My farmer kept my secrets hidden with care.

Find the spot where roots grow deep—

What famous turnip could I be?"

Learning Prompt:

Students discover that the Gilfeather turnip was developed by John Gilfeather in Wardsboro, Vermont in the early 1900s. He kept the seeds secret by trimming the tops and roots before sale. Research historical records, find photos to learn what Wardsboro, Vermont was like in the early 1900s. Compare the similarities and differences with your own Vermont town or city.

Clue 2: Not Quite a Turnip, Not Quite a Rutabaga

 Clue:

"My name is turnip, but there's lots more to know—
My leafy top has a waxy glow.
I'm mild and sweet, not bitter or hot—
Some say I'm a hybrid... or not?"

Learning Prompt:

The Gilfeather turnip is believed to be a cross between a turnip and rutabaga, but it's genetically unique—a true heirloom variety. Students examine leaf shape, waxy coating, and compare with other brassicas, drawing or tracing or using a printed copy of the leaf to label its parts. Create an accessible digital document or poster of the vocabulary words as a standard bank for learners to reference through the program. List each word, include its pronunciation in written form and/or written in the syllables, see below.

Example. A leaf typically consists of several important parts:

- the lamina (or blade) (lam-i-na), the flat, green surface where photosynthesis occurs
- the petiole (pet-i/ee/-ole), which is the stalk attaching the leaf to the stem
- the midrib (mid-rib), a prominent central vein; the veins, which are smaller veins branching from the midrib
- the margin (mar-gin), the edge of the leaf

*some leaves have a leaf base where the petiole connects to the stem, and a cuticle, a waxy layer on the surface

Clue 3: Power Up With Plants

 Clue:

"I'm high in fiber and Vitamin C,
Good for your gut and immunity!
I grow under the soil, and my power is bright—
Eat me steamed, mashed, or roasted just right."

Learning Prompt:

Nutrition time! Students learn that Gilfeather turnips are high in fiber, Vitamin C, potassium, and are low in calories. They can explore healthy ways to cook turnips and compare nutrition with other root vegetables.

Make a digital or printed collection of recipes every learner can have access to or a copy of.

Clue 4: Slow and Steady Wins the Root

 Clue:

"I am patient beneath the soil,
I don't like heat—I like cool toil.
So when the leaves start turning gold,
That's the sign I'm ready to be sold."

Learning Prompt:

Students track plant growth stages with a digital or print data chart or digital audio/video data entries (date, time of day, observations, comparisons and predictions), and learn that Gilfeather turnips take 80–90 days to mature, and taste best after a light frost, which converts starches into sugars. A garden journal of changes can be kept, too.

Clue 5: Vermont's Official Root

 Clue:

"In 2016, I won the crown,
As Vermont's root of high renown.
Cook me up in soups or pie—
I'm the state root veggie, and now you know why!"

Learning Prompt:

In 2016, the Gilfeather turnip became Vermont's official state vegetable. Students research records to learn how that happened and who helped make it official. Consider writing a mock bill for another local veggie.

Reflect! A Literacy Activity: Secret Seed Keepers

Have students write a short mystery story or comic about how John Gilfeather protected his seeds—or design seed packets that tell the turnip's story with artwork, facts, and care instructions.

- Present the information to an elementary class grades 3-4 in a whole group format
- Partner a middle grades student with a gr. 3-4 student to read their comic strip, discuss the information and writing style, etc.

References:

Gilfeather Turnips: All About Them. Cedar Circle Farm.

<https://cedarcirclefarm.org/tips/entry/gilfeather-turnips-all-about-them>

Mother Earth Gardener. Profiles: The 'Gilfeather' Turnip: A Vermont Heirloom Variety. Casey, Halley. August 20, 2018.

<https://www.motherearthgardener.com/profiles/gilfeather-turnip-zemz18fzsphe/>

Vermont Gets A State Vegetable: The Gilfeather Turnip, A Wardsboro Heirloom. Vermont Public | By Patti Daniels, Jane Lindholm. Published May 23, 2016 at 3:58 PM EDT

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