

Cover Crop Series

Leafy turnip: turning the soil for centuries

Turnips have been used for animal fodder and soil improvement for hundreds of years in Europe and played a pivotal role in England's Agricultural Revolution.

While tillage radishes have become the "rock stars" of the mixed species paddock, the old turnip, especially some of the new varieties, provides many of the same benefits. Like all brassicas, turnips fumigate the soil and scavenge nitrogen and their tap roots help to break up soil, though obviously to a much lesser degree than the tillage radish.

Our Resilient Farms Agronomist, Jade Killoran, says: "Leafy turnips are cost effective as they have a very small seed and can be sown at 1-2 kg/ha in a mix. (Tillage radish seed is a similar price, but have larger seeds.) Leafy turnip seeds germinate quickly, like radish, and provide good early grazing feed in an autumn or spring sowing. They are not bred for their taproot, but rather have a small bulb which can also be eaten by stock. Foliage is of a similar nutritional value to tillage radish. A crop of leafy turnip can be grazed more than once. Less drought hardy than radish, they can however cope with lower temperatures. Radish and fodder rape will provide more durable feed but, leafy turnip gives rapid bulk in the first 1-3 grazings. I have been using them in my seed mixes for the last three years with great results."

Interestingly a study done in November 2010 on an Ohio dairy farm found that turnip (in this case Appin Turnip) contained more nitrogen than radish (Groundhog Cover Crop Radish). Radishes/acre averaged 200 units of nitrogen whereas nitrogen tested in Appin Turnip/acre from the same farm showed nearly 300 units of nitrogen.

Wild forms of the turnip are found over western Asia and Europe. Starting as early as 2000 BC, related oilseed subspecies of *Brassica rapa* like *oleifera* may have been domesticated several times from the Mediterranean to India, though these are not the same turnips cultivated for its roots. Edible turnips were possibly first cultivated in northern Europe, and were an important food in the Hellenistic and Roman world. The turnip eventually spread east to China, and reached Japan by 700 AD.



Turbulent Turnip Facts:

The Revolutionary Turnip

Around 1700 Charles "Turnip" Townshend, English nobleman and politician, started to promote the use of turnips in a four-year crop-rotation system that enabled year-round livestock feeding. Turnips were therefore a major factor in England's Agrarian Revolution which began in the 1700s. Not only did they allow newly enclosed fields to be grazed (and manured) in winter, but they helped to re-condition the soil. Clover and turnips grown in a field after wheat, barley or oats, naturally replaced nutrients into the soil.

The Name of the Turnip

The word *turnip* is a compound of *turn* as in turned/rounded on a lathe and *neep*, which is derived from Latin *napus*, the word for the plant. *Brassica rapa* is the Latin classification for turnip of which there are hundreds of varieties some bred for their edible root, others such as the Leafy turnip, which is *Brassica rapa*, *L. var. rapa*, for its foliage.

The Halloween Turnip

Before Americans there were Europeans. Before Halloween there was Samhain. Before trick-or-treating there was guising and before pumpkins there were turnips. Other European countries also used turnips and still do, but nowadays, like everywhere, you're more likely to see a pumpkin.

These days the best place to see turnip art is Switzerland. In November, many towns celebrate *Räbechilbi*, literally "turnip party". The turnip lanterns represent the warmth of home during the cold winter months so are not related to Halloween. The biggest *Räbechilbi* festival is in Richterswil. The centre of town is lit up with hundreds of lanterns and the main event is a big parade through town with marching bands and floats decorated with turnip lanterns. Most of the carvers use electrical tools these days.

The Aristocratic Turnip

The humble turnip features in several coats of arms. It was used by Leonhard von Keutschach, prince-archbishop of Salzburg and the turnip is still the heart shield in the arms of Keutschach am See.

The Titanic Turnip

The heaviest turnip recorded was 29kg, grown by Damien Allard in Canada in 2020. The longest turnip recorded was just over 4 metres. It was grown in Malvern in September 2019 by Joe Atherton and is mostly fibrous root.

"The Gigantic Turnip" is a Russian folktale where it takes a whole village including a mouse to pull a massive turnip out of the earth.

Turnips were the butt of many jests in the 1990s British comedy TV series *Blackadder*. When Baldrick says "Have you ever dreamed of a great big turnip in the country?" he might have been thinking of the Big Things. If Australia has a Big Pineapple, why not the Big Neep?





Charles Townshend, 2nd Viscount Townshend, (1674 – 1738) aka Turnip Townshend was an English Whig statesman and turnip enthusiast.



Turnip Festival in Switzerland



The street is lined with people eager to see this year's collection of artful masterpieces. Families huddle together for extra warmth on this chilly November evening.

The parade is worth waiting for and is extra sweet with a cup of mulled wine (*Glühwein*) in hand. Until next year!

