

Review of the Development of the Vates Collard

Peter B. Schultz, Director, Virginia Tech, Hampton Roads AREC

Research into improvement in collards began at the Virginia Truck Experiment Station (now the Hampton Roads Agriculture and Extension Center) in Princess Anne County (now Virginia Beach) in the 1930's towards the end of the Great Depression. A research report in May, 1937 stated that breeding experiments had been started to produce a cold resistant, heading type of collard. In May, 1938, it was reported that the hybrids are now being "selfed" (self-pollinated) to produce a uniform strain of cold resistant collards satisfactory to the trade. The goal was to breed a collard that could be grown, harvested and consumed over the longest period of time possible. The plants needed to be cold tolerant and go to seed (bolt) as late as possible the following spring. Foliage also needed to be dark green in color and a "desirable size". Mr. Michael Parker, Horticulturist at the Virginia Truck Experiment Station was the lead researcher who selected the plants from the local area with the desirable attributes, and collected the seed for planting the following year. The original seed was thought to have come from a church group in Norfolk County. Collards were open pollinated so one could harvest the seeds, plant them again the following year, and repeat the process until variability was reduced and the plants consistently had the desired characteristics. The Experiment Station would grow the selection in quantities sufficient to make seed available to growers in the region, directly to growers or through area seed dealers (seedsmen). Following the suggestion of a local seedsman all strains of vegetables developed by the Experiment Station would be known as Vates (contraction of Virginia Truck Experiment Station). The Vates collard was so named and introduced several years prior to its mention in the Vegetable Growers News, August, 1946 issue. It was described in the Vegetable Growers News 4:5, November 1949 as follows:

"The Vates collard is also the result of several years' selections of a strain developed at this station. It has made a very favorable impression in out-of-state plantings. This collard is a non-heading type that is low-growing, broad and spreading. In our 1949 planting we have plants measuring more than 4 feet in diameter with leaf blades 18 inches long and 16 inches broad. The leaves of the Vates collard are thick-textured with a high ratio of blade to petiole or stalk. This greatly reduces the waste incident to preparation for cooking. A form of marketing to which the Vates variety would be well adapted is to tie its large leaves in bunches. This would eliminate much of the plant bruising and breakage from field to market. Most plants of this variety are a brilliant glossy green in color with a few showing a slight tendency to grayish green. As yet we have seen very little injury to even the largest plants when wintered over in the field."

Additional Vates varieties, such as a cold resistant kale variety, spinach, and cantaloupe were developed for small farms that sold their vegetables at market. The research continued with the Vates variety to improve it further and Vates LS was developed. Dr. Edward Borchers continued the vegetable breeding work, selecting the desirable traits in a similar manner to Mr. Parker, and in 1979 released an improved, long standing variety named Champion. It was vigorous like Vates and bolted even later in the spring, providing a fresh, nutritious, vegetable that could be harvested from October

until April. A seed company in the western U.S. was supplied with foundation seed to grow for national sales.



Vates collards.



Figure 3.

Champion collards.

The Vates varieties of collards and kale, were all developed at the Virginia Truck Experiment Station for small farms that sold their vegetables at market. Vates is an acronym for the Virginia Truck Experiment Station. The term "truck" comes from the French word "troquer," meaning "to barter".

Sources:

<http://hamptonroads.com/2009/10/collards-winter-staple-local-wonder>

<https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/hs353>

<http://www.seedlibrary.org/champion-collards.html>

Vegetable Growers News 4:5, November 1949

Vegetable Growers News, 1:2, August, 1946

Dr. Edward A. Borchers, personal communication

Mr. Louis Cullipher, personal communication

Here is a traditional Southern recipe for collards adapted from the Cullipher family recipe who has grown Vates collards commercially for 3 generations in coastal North Carolina and Virginia.

RECIPE

A Pot of Collards

-2 pounds collards

-1 teaspoon sugar - optional

-1/2 lb. country ham, smoked ham hock, smoked turkey leg or wing, bacon etc.

-Salt to taste (may not require salt if your meat is very salty)

-Water to cover well after they are wilted

Wash the leaves well. Fold the leaves in half and pull out the stems. Roll several leaves together and cut into strips. Bring to a boil and simmer until tender and buttery. About an hour or 2.

When done, take collards out of pot. Drain collards well and put in bowl.

Chop or cut through collards well. Then, if you like, you can spoon some of the fat off the top of the pot likker and put on top of the collards.

Garnish with chow chow. When the bowl is empty, sop up the remaining pot likker with fresh corn bread. Get another bowl and repeat.