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She sees the world in seeds

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In 1965, when the Minnesota State Fair first added Crop Art to its competition category, the goal was simple: to help residents become familiar with the crops grown in the state.

While city- and suburban-dwellers might have been able to tell a corn cob from a soybean pod, beyond that, it probably got a little fuzzy.

The rules for Crop Art were and are pretty straightforward. Entrants are limited to using seeds of farm crops that are grown in Minnesota or are adaptable to being grown here: grasses and grains; vegetable and flower seeds. In some categories, parts of plants can also be used.

Linda Paulsen of rural Hackensack is a dedicated and skilled practitioner of this unique Minnesota art form. Not only has she entered Crop Art creations at the State Fair for 53 years, she's won 11 "Best of Show" awards plus so many blue ribbons she's lost count.

This year for the 11th time, Linda took "Best of Show" with a portrait of the late actress Betty White, created with thousands of tiny seeds.

“I’d thought of Betty White for several years,” she reflected recently from her home near Woman Lake, where dozens of Crop Art pieces cover the walls. “Then when she passed [on Dec. 31, 2021], I thought the time was right to honor her seven decade career as an actress and comedian. I thought of all the generations she’s entertained!”

Linda started work on White’s crop art portrait the week after White’s death and finished the first week of August, just in time for the state fair.

The entry was created from 11 kinds of seeds: timothy, amaranth, cream of wheat (an altered seed limited to 20 percent), salsify (AKA oyster plant), indigo grass, lettuce, trefoil, alyssum, lily, red millet and camelina.

Along with every entry, including Betty White’s portrait, Linda submits a ledger with the seeds used affixed to a card.

Camelina (also called false flax) is new to Minnesota, Linda explains. First grown in Montana, it has been developed by the University of Minnesota as an oil seed crop, making it eligible for use in Crop Art.

The ‘special occasions’ division allows use of limited amounts of paint or dye that provide the blue background and Betty’s blue eyes. Other categories allow only seeds, which somewhat restricts the range of colors.

To illustrate, Betty’s hair highlights were created from salsify seeds; her hair, timothy seeds; shadings, indigo and some lettuce seeds; complexion, amaranth; and eyebrows, indigo grass.

Linda keeps a library of 84 different kinds of eligible seeds that she has bought, gathered or that were given to her by friends and family; plus five or six plant parts that can be used.

How can a crop artist place those tiny seeds so meticulously? As it turns out, the tools are simple, but a steady hand is mandatory.

“You take a toothpick with a dab of glue on the tip, touch the seed and carry it to glue that’s been placed on the background,” she describes. “It’s time-consuming — but so relaxing.”

(The background has a sketch or tracing to guide seed placement.)

The enthusiasm for crop art runs in Linda’s family. Her mother, Lillian Colton, entered Crop Art the second year the competition was held and encouraged her daughter to try her hand. At one time, four generations were competing in Crop Art: Linda, her mom, and for a few years, her daughter and grandchildren.

The story of crop art and Lillian’s role is told in the Minnesota Historical Society’s book, “Seed Queen, The Story of Crop Art and the Amazing Lillian Colton.”

(“Seed Queen” is available through the Kitchigami Regional Library System and can be ordered from the Minnesota Historical Society bookstore at <https://shop.mnhs.org/products/seed-queen>)

In 2019 Linda made the news when she won one of her many blue ribbons for the image of Lin-Manuel Miranda, playwright and star of the hit Broadway musical, “Hamilton,” created with 17 different types seeds.

A local fan of Miranda’s tweeted the news to the actor, who responded with words of praise:

“A blue ribbon at the Minnesota State Fair?! Linda Paulsen! Those are seeds?! You’ve outdone yourself!”

In short order, Linda’s phone was ringing off the hook with calls from family and friends, and the story was picked up by numerous Twin Cities media outlets.

Miranda’s portrait still hangs on the wall, shoulder to shoulder with Dolly Parton, Taylor Swift, Frank Sinatra, Lucille Ball Paul McCartney, and dozens of others.

Linda doesn’t only do portraits; she’s done Christmas scenes, landscapes, wildlife, animals, patriotic themes — whatever piques her interest.

Judging by the number of entries, interest in Crop Art is growing — 279 in 2022, compared to about 180 in the pre-pandemic year of 2019.

Until recently, Minnesota was the only state fair with a category for individual Crop Art entries. Since then, Iowa has added Crop Art and Pennsylvania looked into the possibility.

The Minnesota State Fair also has a category for out of state contestants. The first two years Linda tried Crop Art, she lived in Wisconsin, so she entered in that category. This year she was unable to attend the fair in person but mailed in her entry.

And as soon as one state fair is over, “I start thinking about next year’s project!”

