

NINA MOINI: This is *Minnesota Now*. I'm Nina Moini. We are live from the first day of the Minnesota State Fair with a beautiful audience. Give yourselves a round of applause. Thank you for visiting the MPR stage here.

[APPLAUSE]

For many Minnesotans, there are several State Fair staples. Maybe it's Sweet Martha's, or the giant slide, or maybe it's seeing the butter sculptures. But over the past several years, the crop art exhibit has joined the list of must see attractions.

Joining me now is the woman behind putting the contest and exhibit together. Marta Shore is the Crop Art Assistant Superintendent. Thank you for being with us, Marta.

MARTA SHORE: Thank you. It's actually crop art and scarecrow.

NINA MOINI: And scarecrow.

MARTA SHORE: Gotta give props to scarecrow.

NINA MOINI: That's right. Put some respect on them. So crop art really has exploded. I know it's been around for a long time, right? It didn't just crop up, so to speak. But how many entries did you get this year? And how is it comparing to previous years? You're seeing that growth, right?

MARTA SHORE: Oh, for sure. Yeah, so crop art's been around since 1965. But since the pandemic, it's just exploded. They hired me in 2023 when they had 225 entries. Last year, we had 350-- or, sorry, 2024, we had 350. Last year, we had 450. This year, we have almost 600 entries.

NINA MOINI: Wow. That's amazing. Why do you think that is? You mentioned the pandemic. Were people just at home doing crafts? Or what are you seeing?

MARTA SHORE: I think so. I think people were like, if I'm going to start at any time, I'm going to start now, because what else am I doing? And then I think once you make a piece, you get hooked. That was definitely true for me. I did my first piece in 2015. And I was just hooked. I just loved it.

NINA MOINI: And for those who don't know, could you give a little overview of just what crop art is, what it entails, what you may use?

MARTA SHORE: Yes. So we call it "crop art" at the Minnesota State Fair because it's about honoring the agriculture in Minnesota. So you're supposed to use materials from crops-- materials that are grown commercially in Minnesota and that we can propagate in Minnesota. And the other reason we call it crop art is you don't have to use seeds. You can use other materials from the crops.

NINA MOINI: This morning, the line-- I didn't see this myself, but I believe the line to see crop art was going out of the ag building and onto the street.

MARTA SHORE: Yes.

NINA MOINI: What do you think it is about-- sometimes I think people make really meaningful pieces too. There's a lot of messages behind what people are making. Like, what do you think about that?

MARTA SHORE: So the reason the line went outside is we're now directing the line outside, because there were so many people in line inside last year that we weren't good neighbors to the other people in our building. And we kind of exceeded fire limits. So the line is now outside.

So if you come, come in that door near the skyway. That's where the line is. And that's your best opportunity to see the crop art this year. The reason I think it's exploded is because we put a lot of rules and regulations around what you can use, or what the shape of your piece is, or what the materials you're using. But we put very few rules around content.

As long as you're not swearing, showing nudity, trying to get free advertising, or giving some sort of social media handle that could be changed into one of those first three, we tend to put it up. So it's a really fantastic form of expression.

NINA MOINI: And as a crop artist yourself, tell us a little bit about, do you enter a state of flow? What are you thinking about as you're putting it together? How long does it take to put one of these kind of masterpieces we see together?

MARTA SHORE: So the time it takes is very variable, depending on the size of the piece and the size of the seeds. So in 2024, I made my most complicated piece, which is a tribute to Dolly Parton. So I brought it back this year, of course.

NINA MOINI: Aw.

MARTA SHORE: And I made my least complicated piece, which was a tribute to Charli XCX's album "Brat." Dolly Parton took 120 hours and "Brat" took four.

NINA MOINI: Wow. What's the difference. Tell me a little bit more. Is it the differences in what you're using, the materials?

MARTA SHORE: Yes. So the album cover for "Brat" is just a green album with the word "Brat" written on it. So that's certainly a lot less complicated than trying to make the cover of "Jolene," where I'm trying to actually create a portrait of Dolly Parton.

And I love her so much. I just had to do it right. So part of that time is pulling up things that don't work, and being OK with the failure, and being OK with an idea and it not working and then going, let me try something else.

NINA MOINI: So when folks are judging these pieces, some of them are so intricate. They're just beautiful pieces. How are you deciding? What criteria are judges using to make that blue ribbon crop art piece?

MARTA SHORE: So, first of all, it's about using seeds and crop materials that are grown and propagated in Minnesota. So if you're using something like white rice that's not grown and propagated in Minnesota, so you immediately get eliminated from judging.

NINA MOINI: OK.

MARTA SHORE: We still show it because we show them, but you get eliminated from judging. If you use an invasive species like crown vetch, you will be eliminated from judging. If you don't meet the criteria for the class, and there are 25 different classes, then you will be eliminated from judging. And then they judge based on neatness, complexity, artistry, innovation, and representation of crops.

NINA MOINI: Wow. Amazing. So you mentioned the crop art community is growing. I understand there are workshops now, too, where people can learn more if they're not ready to just jump in at home. Tell me a little bit about that and how more people can get involved with crop art.

MARTA SHORE: So, yeah, part of the reason crop art has expanded is that I do also teach classes through Minneapolis Public Schools community ed and White Bear Center for the Arts. So I'm part of the problem, for sure. I will also tell you, we just have a really great supportive crop art community.

There is a website called cropart.com, which is all sorts of how-to guides. I always recommend people look at that if you want to get started. But also, I think the thing to keep in mind is that if you make it, we put it up-- unless you're being a jerk.

NINA MOINI: Right.

MARTA SHORE: So make it, and we'll put it up. That's what happened to me. My first piece was terrible, but I submitted it, and they put it on the wall. And I was like, I'm an artist now.

NINA MOINI: Aw, I love that, though. So I know you said you put everything up, but the only seeds that can be used for the competition aspect, like you mentioned, are grown in Minnesota. So next year, quinoa will no longer be allowed, which I understand has caused a bit of a stir. Can you talk about how those decisions are made each year and why?

MARTA SHORE: Yes. So quinoa, chia, and cardamom are all not allowed next year. So if you use them, we'll still hang it up. We won't judge it. You won't be entered in the judging.

And the reason is that we can't grow those in Minnesota. Quinoa, in particular, is grown in mountainous regions. And our temperature fluctuations are just too great in Minnesota. You can maybe grow it one year, but you can't save those seeds and plant it again.

And, ultimately, this comes back to honoring our agriculture. So while quinoa is beautiful because it comes in a ton of different colors and it's really, really small, so you can fit it in those little tiny crevices, the reality is it's not a crop. So it can't be used for crop art.

NINA MOINI: OK. Yeah. No. You got to lay the law down at some point. How can people see the winning pieces? So at what point are they judged, crowned, or given the blue ribbon? And then how can people come and see those?

MARTA SHORE: So we had drop-off for crop art last Saturday. We had judging Monday. So we let the fair know the winners on Monday. And then Tuesday and Wednesday, we hung and placed the 600 pieces in the room.

So when you first walk into the room from the line on your left will be all the grand prize winners and all the sponsored prize winners. And then, as you go around, you'll see the first place winners that aren't the grand prize amongst the pieces. So the best way to figure out which ones are the winners is there's a big placard on the wall that says the class. And we put the winners around that placard. So that's a good way to try to find the winning pieces.

NINA MOINI: And so, Marta, you've been, obviously, coming to the fair, then, for years and years. I'm curious to know, when you're not doing your crop art scarecrow thing, what else do you like to do? Is there something you specifically like to do, or maybe eat, or somewhere you like to visit?

MARTA SHORE: So I'm a big fan of the TV genre "underestimated old ladies solving crimes." And I like those books too. So that's part of it, for sure. My husband and I are big baseball fans. We're big Twins fans. We get to about 10 games a year.

NINA MOINI: At the fair, do you like anything specific? Or do you not have much time outside of your job and your duties?

MARTA SHORE: I do miss seeing things at the fair, for sure. I do want to get to the giant slide. I love the giant slide. I love the skyway. I do love creative activities because they make me feel like my exhibit is sparse.

[LAUGHTER]

NINA MOINI: Well, I hope you take time for yourself, Marta, and get on that giant slide. Thank you so much for your work and for sharing with us. We appreciate your time.

MARTA SHORE: Thank you.

NINA MOINI: Marta Shore is a crop artist and assistant superintendent of crop art. Let's give her a round of applause, everybody. That's a big job here.