NRCS Employee, Painter Expresses Her Love of the Land with an Unusual Artist’s Medium—Soil

Linda Greene

As a child, Jan Lang spent summers in northwestern Iowa with her grandmother, who maintained a huge garden that, for Jan, symbolized beauty and abundance. Jan spent countless hours helping and listening to her grandmother talk about the soil, plants, insects, and garden animals, including a large and friendly bull snake that lived in the potato patch. While her grandmother had a grade-school education, she was nonetheless a knowledgeable conservationist, understanding the importance of composting and of her rain barrels, so nothing went to waste. Jan learned to respect the land from her grandmother, who often humorously stated that, “Even the birds know better than to poop in their nest.” Jan also learned to love the soil, plants, and animals, and it came as no surprise that years later, she found herself working for the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) at its Kellogg Soil Survey Laboratory, in Lincoln, NE. For the last 25 years, Jan has supported soil survey and conservation efforts there as a laboratory analyst.

It was also there that Jan discovered a new way to express her reverence of nature through art. She saw that she could use the soil she worked with every day to make paints of various hues, resulting in works of art that would be both beautiful and unique.

The process was surprisingly simple. Soils of various colors were gathered and allowed to dry individually. Each dried soil sample was crushed into a powder, first using a hammer or mallet and then with mortar and pestle until the soil became an extremely fine material. Next, each finely ground soil sample was placed in its own paper cup to create a color palette. A small amount of artist acrylic was then poured into each of another set of cups. Small amounts of ground soil were added to each to develop color and desired consistency. The result was a choice of colors that represented the natural resources Jan is passionate about.

Jan’s paintings would garner praise and attention from the public as well as the art community. To commemorate the 2004 bicentennial of the Lewis and Clark expedition, she created a series of soil paintings that depicted the famous explorers’ travels from St. Louis, up the Missouri River, and across the newly acquired Louisiana Purchase. These paintings and the soil paint Jan used were featured in the Norfolk Daily Newspaper, Nebraska Life Magazine, and many of the publications created for the Lewis and Clark Celebration. Temple University’s Tyler School of Art in Philadelphia also displayed one of Jan’s Lewis and Clark paintings, showing the viewing public the unique use of soil as an element for painting. She also won “Best in Show” for her art in three consecutive years at the Nebraska State Fair.

In addition, the soil paint method has been turned into a learning activity for Lincoln Nebraska’s public school students to generate interest and enthusiasm, not only for art, but also for soil science.

Jan was commissioned to paint three murals on structural columns of the National Soil Survey Center in Lincoln, NE. Each mural depicts soils and resources found in a different areas of the country. The East was painted with a focus on forest soils, the Heartland with a focus on agricultural soils, and the West