

Bedford Artist

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"I had always grown pumpkins," Leon explains. "And, one year I threw in a handful of gourd seeds. My mother decided it would be a fun gift."

"Turned out to be a practical one. I enjoyed the magazine and began learning a lot about growing gourds. The first thing you learn is that there isn't much to learn because there certainly has never been any gourd research done."

But Leon did learn there is a market for gourds especially among artists.

It was the reason for his gift to Holly.

Browsing through an "idea" folder, Holly was surprised to find a clipping she had saved on an artist she particularly liked. "I realized he was painting gourds," she remembers.

Picking one of her gifts from the shelf, she cleaned it off and started to work. "Since then, I haven't been able to stop," she laughs. "I might have to become a member of gourd painters anonymous."

Holly has created all types of gourd art, but her specialty has become "Santa Clauses." "At first I resisted," she admits. "A lot of gourd painters do Santa Claus. But then, I found that they sell extremely well. I have trouble keeping up with the demand."

Some of her Santa Claus creations are rosy cheeked and twinkle eyed while others have the more sedate appearance of the early American St. Nicholas.

Her Santas sell from \$12 to \$34 while other, more artistic creations go as high as \$50, wholesale. She sells to "arty" and museum

gift shops. Holly also plans to attend the New York Gift Show in January.

The entire Coia family including husband, Gene, and daughter, Emily, enjoy browsing through museums where they can see the many uses of gourds throughout the centuries.

"Gourds have been used for dishes, vases, eating utensils, and as artwork. They have made their own contribution to the civilization of man."

Once the gourds are picked, they must be allowed to dry on their own. As the moisture comes out of the gourd, it turns into a mass of mold which, at first, caused some panic reaction in Holly who had just purchased a truckload from her friend, Leon.

Once the gourds rattle, they can be scrubbed off and a nature's canvas is ready for use.

Leon plants about three acres of gourds on the family's 250-acre

farm. He can get about 1,000 gourds per acre in a good season. Like all other types of farming, the weather must cooperate. Gourds like moisture, but will tolerate dry weather better than some crops.

An early frost is the biggest threat. If the gourds have not reached maturity by frost, they do not survive.

The Sollenbergers, dad, Ray; sister, Lori; and Leon also milk 75 registered Jerseys. "Actually my dad and sister do the milking," Leon says. "I'm not a cow man. I prefer to do the field work."

He has found that gourds have a longer selling season than pumpkins, which he also grows. "If you haven't sold a pumpkin by mid-

October, forget it," he advises.

"But the gourds can be attractive to artists anytime." one of his latest customers is a company which makes trolls and uses spooinggourds for noses.

Gourd varieties include such names as "spoon," "bottle," "legendary," "dipper," "crown of thorns," "penguin," "snake," and "shevit."

Gourds sell from \$1 to \$10 per piece and that is exactly the way they must be harvested - by the piece. "It's a lot of manual labor," admits Leon.

"Planting can be done with any seed planter, but the picking is done by hand, piece by piece."

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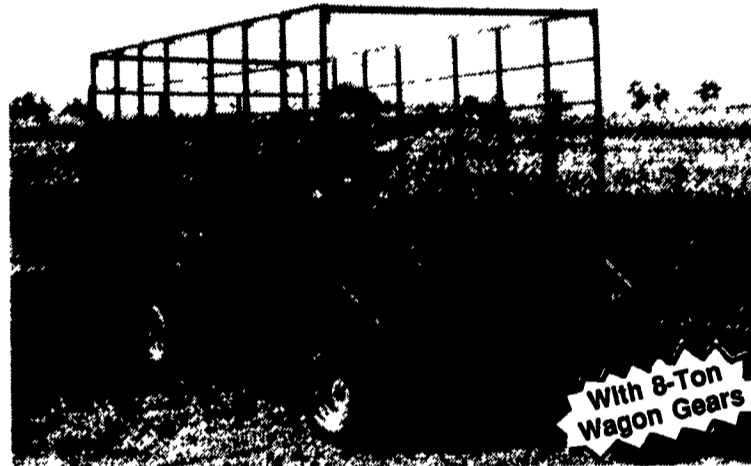
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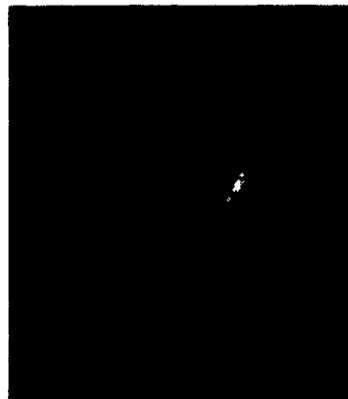
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