

# Woman joins World Food Prize winners

By Gene Lucht

Iowa Farmer Today

**D**ES MOINES — The subject was the same, but the people broke new ground last week when this year's World Food Prize recipients were announced.

The winners were Surinder K. Vasal of India and Evangelina Villegas of Mexico, who worked together to develop a better version of an old and familiar crop — corn. Villegas was the first woman to win the World Food Prize.

"As the father of a daughter who is taking chemistry this year ... this emphasizes the important role for women in the sciences," World Food Prize Foundation President Kenneth Quinn told those gathered for the announcement.

"I HOPE Dr. Villegas will be an inspiration for young girls ... to look at and consider careers that involve the sciences."

Villegas and Vasal worked for nearly three decades on the development of what is commonly called Quality Protein Maize or QPM.

This corn contains higher levels of lysine and tryptophan, two types of essential amino acids

that humans cannot synthesize in their bodies.

Since corn is used as a weaning food for babies in many developing countries, the lack of those amino acids often led to higher levels of child malnutrition and starvation.

Corn containing higher levels of those amino acids was developed at Purdue University in the 1960s. But that corn, called opaque 2 corn because the kernel was opaque, did not yield well and had a soft kernel that made it susceptible to disease.

This year's food prize laureates worked to overcome those hurdles and made QPM a crop farmers could grow and use to feed the populations in developing nations.

"The potential impact of their work is breathtaking," says Quinn. "By this year, it is estimated that 2.5 million acres of QPM are being planted in developing nations. That is expected to triple by the year 2003."

That means better nutrition and less starvation.

"If you have ever seen children die, then you know and understand fully why Dr. (Norman) Borlaug created this prize," says Quinn, former ambassador to Cambodia.

Borlaug, an Iowa native and

1970 Nobel Peace Prize laureate, was a long-time researcher who is credited for helping to start the "green revolution" in developing nations.

He started the World Food Prize in 1986 and honored its first winner in 1987.

In 1990, Des Moines businessman John Ruan became sponsor of the prize and gave \$10 million to endow it permanently. Iowa State University serves as secretariat for the prize.

## Distinguished people on Food Prize list

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**D**ES MOINES — When Surindar Vasal and Evangelina Villegas were named this year's World Food Prize recipients, they joined a distinguished group.

Founded by Norman Borlaug in 1986, the prize has honored a number of highly respected researchers.

The list of past World Food Prize winners includes:

- 1987, M.S. Swaminithan, architect of India's "green revolution."
- 1988, Robert Chandler Jr., who founded the International

"You should know that you are participating today in the most important thing in the world — food," Ruan said during the Sept. 7 announcement.

In a world where population is rising quickly and where land is being paved and removed from production, much needs to be done to increase food production, to encourage researchers to do more, and to inspire young people to enter the field of food research, he said.

Rice Institute.

- 1989, Verghese Kurien, who organized cooperatives in India.
- 1990, John Niederhauser, who discovered a durable resistance to potato blight disease.
- 1991, Nevin Scrimshaw, who developed the principle for low-cost protein-rich food products to combat nutrition in developing nations.
- 1992, Edward Knipling and Raymond Bushland, entomologists who developed the sterile insect technique to control parasites.
- 1993, He Kang, the former minister of agriculture in China, who was credited with helping develop policies aimed at increasing that nation's ag production.
- 1994, Muhammad Yunis, founder of the Grameen Bank in India, which revolutionized the idea of small loan programs, often of only a few dollars, to help

The World Food Prize will be officially presented to Villegas, a Mexican native who earned her doctorate degree at North Dakota State University, and Vasal, a native of India, on Oct. 12 at the state Capitol.

A symposium on biotechnology will be Oct. 12-13 and the World Food Prize Youth Institute is set for Oct. 14.

For more information, check out the World Food Prize Web page [www.worldfoodprize.org](http://www.worldfoodprize.org).

the poor to become more self-sufficient.

- 1995, Hans Herren, who worked on biological control of the cassava mealybug in Africa.
- 1996, Henry Beachell and Gurdev Khush, who shared credit for rice genetic lines which dramatically increased production of that crop worldwide.
- 1997, Ray Smith and Perry Adkisson, who were credited with developing the idea of Integrated Pest Management (IPM).
- 1998, B.R. Barwale, credited with leading the development of the private seed industry in India, was the winner.
- 1999, Walter Plowright, a British veterinarian who helped develop a vaccine to help eliminate rinderpest, a dangerous animal virus in Africa.

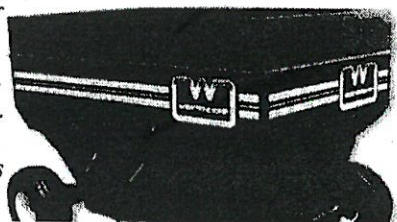
Each winner gets a sculpture and \$250,000.

This year's winners, Villegas and Vasal, working together in maize breeding.

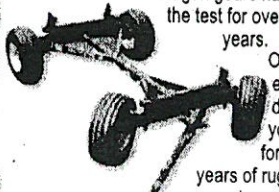
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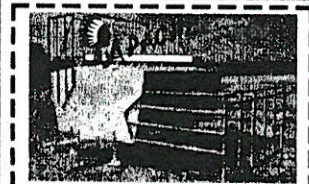
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