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One of the colorful participants in the 66th Santa Barbara International Orchid Show isn't an orchid at all.

It's the watercolor artwork by Santa Barbara resident Suemae Lin Willhite, who, in a first for the show, is demonstrating her style of Chinese brush painting.

In keeping with the show's main attraction, Ms. Willhite is dazzling crowds at Earl Warren Showgrounds, turning blank sheets of white paper into watercolors of orchids of various types and colors.

To most, the almost-50 artist uses her calligraphy skills to add a Chinese poem.

Orchids make a good muse, she said, for many reasons. "The colors and the fragrance and the shapes. It's flowing, it's like a dancing skirt."

"Then you get a surprise in the center," she added. "Like my paintings, the color is popping. It entices you, you can't take your eyes off it."

Ms. Willhite also grows orchids at home but she doesn't enter them in the show.

"I can only handle one thing at a time. Painting is an art. If I'm going to show my orchids, that's another dimension."

Ms. Willhite will be back at the show from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. today demonstrating her painting.

With this year's edition, the Santa Barbara International Orchid Show can officially say it's the longest continuing running event of its kind in the U.S.

This year's theme is "Get Your Kicks with Orchids," a nod to the song "(Get your kicks on) Route 66."

Hundreds of orchids are on display from nearly 60 exhibitors, including individuals and orchid societies. And in Warren Hall, 37 vendors have orchids and other items for sale.

"We are up from last year," said Sandra Russell, show secretary. "A lot of the exhibitors are societies, so they have a number of members who would come in and each member would bring in two or three plants."

Judging for a show like this includes individual plants, as well as the displays as a whole.



Shown above and below are some of the orchids on display at the Earl Warren Showgrounds.

Best orchid in the show went to a Gongora bufonia from Gallup & Stribling, grown by Santa Barbara Orchid Estate.

Grand champion cymbidium of show went to Cym Yoko Takai "Hatfields" Red Beauty x Hazel Faye.

Ms. Russell said the longevity of this show is a tribute to a group of dedicated people. "They put in a lot of time and effort. And, this is a great place to grow orchids."

"And without the people that come to show," she added, "we wouldn't have a show."

Some orchid fans come from close by, while others come from afar.

Esperanza De Anda brought her mother from Los Angeles as a surprise 88th birthday present.

"I grow orchids at home with my mother. My kitchen is full of orchids," said first-time visitor Ms. De Anda. "To see this gorgeous magnificence of colors and shapes, it's just beautiful."

"Wherever you look, wherever you turn, there's beauty. It's a good day to feel pretty."

The birthday girl, Berta, who sported a corsage made from, what else, an orchid, was equally excited.

"All the colors are beautiful, beautiful, beautiful," she said.

The family planned to make a day of the show -- and they were even planning to take something home.

"Are we leaving with orchids?" said a smiling Ms. De Anda. "Oh, yes. Oh, yes, we are. We're very happy to be here, and we'll be here next year."

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YOU SHOULD KNOW

The Santa Barbara International Orchid Show ends its three-day run today at Earl Warren Showgrounds, 3400 Calle Real. Hours are 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Admission is \$12 general, \$10 for students with ID and seniors 65 and older; free to children 12 and younger, accompanied by an adult. Parking is \$5.



