Syd Carpenter is a sculptor living in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. She studied painting and ceramics at the Tyler School of Art. While learning more about Black farmers and gardeners for a sculpture series, Carpenter discovered the celebrity of her own grandmother, whose bountiful Victory Garden had nourished her family and community during WWII. She continued to be drawn to the stories of Black caretakers of agricultural land, which became the focus of her work.

Carpenter is an avid gardener herself, continuing to find rest and inspiration among the earth and plants. She and her husband, Steve, created an arts center cooperative that thrived for many years. She continues to be a nurturing figure in the Philadelphia arts community. Carpenter’s work is included in numerous private and public collections including the Philadelphia Museum of Art; Philadelphia Convention Center; Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian Institute; the African American Museum of Philadelphia and the Pennsylvania Convention Center. She is Professor Emeritus of Studio Art at Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania.

Photo credits: Matthew Bender
ABOUT THE SCULPTURE

A collection of familiar forms and everyday objects are collected in a tray - a bowl of grain, an oversized clothes pin, a section of fence posts. The roof of a storage shed serves as a base. Two garden rakes rise and cross in an X to support the rest of the sculpture. Metal utensils dangle from hooks, looking well-used and ready for the next task.

Syd Carpenter feels her sculptures are portraits of a sort, telling stories about the daily lives of Black farmers she met during her travels through the US South in 2012. This sculpture is named after Joseph Fields, a third-generation farmer, and his wife, Helen. They have been farming for over twenty years on Johns Island, South Carolina, and are celebrated as great leaders and teachers. The farmers interviewed by the artist had special relationships with the land. Many described the sense of independence they got from providing for themselves and their community. This is especially notable for African American farmers, whose families experienced over a century of unjust agricultural and land ownership policies following the Civil War and Reconstruction.

Carpenter includes ceramic forms of everyday objects into her work to show this relationship between building, growing, and taking care of the earth. Many of her pieces include overlapping fences, walls, tools and other items to give a sense of the overcrowded clutter typical of a working farm. The utensils in this piece were inspired by the frying pans hanging in Helen’s garage.


LET’S LOOK

• Describe what you see in the sculpture. What does it remind you of?

• What words would you use to describe the sculpture? What do you see that makes you say that?

• What textures, patterns, and colors do you see?

• How might the artist be using symbolism in this sculpture?
Alone or in groups, create a sculpture that says something about the relationship between people and land. Choose a small or large geographical region that interests you, such as the Rocky Mountains, Tokyo, Japan or a local community park. Visit or research the region to find out more about how people interact with it. Incorporate large and small-scale objects in your sculpture to help tell the story.

**What's My Zone?**
Syd Carpenter was inspired to grow her own garden by her grandmother, Indiana Hutson, who became a minor celebrity in the 1940’s, all because her Victory Garden in Pittsburgh was one of the largest in the city. It fed her family and neighbors for nearly a decade! Imagine you are planting your own community garden. Research to find what growing zone you live in and what edible plants survive best in those conditions. List at least five threats a good gardener would be aware of in your zone, and ways to prevent related damage to your harvest.

**“40 Acres and a Mule”**
After the Civil War freed people faced an intense struggle for economic independence. Thousands of the formerly enslaved were given access to land along the southeastern coast from South Carolina to Florida under General Sherman's Special Field Order 15. Sherman’s promise of “40 acres and a mule” was short-lived, however, and much of the land was returned to the white former landowners. Use a range of sources to answer this question: How do you explain the disconnect between the expectations and reality of land ownership and economic independence for African Americans during Reconstruction?

**A Day on Johns Island**
Imagine you have spent time with Helen and Joseph Fields. Write a journal entry that details what you saw and learned while visiting them.