

2026 Cream of the Crop Awards

Contest Overview

The Minnesota Department of Agriculture and Minnesota Grown program are excited to host the 2026 ***Cream of the Crop Awards*** – a statewide contest to celebrate school districts, early care centers, and family day cares who buy, serve, and promote foods from Minnesota Grown farmers and producers!



Contest Period

The 2026 contest period runs February 23 – March 20, 2026. Applications will open on Monday, February 23, and all entries must be received no later than **4 p.m.** on **Friday, March 20** through the online entry portal.

Eligibility

- K-12 school districts, early care centers, and family daycares located in Minnesota are eligible to enter
- Both public and private school districts are eligible to apply
- For K-12 school districts: entries should represent the promotional efforts of a **school district**, not an individual school. Districts with several schools are encouraged to submit photos and information that capture the breadth of their schools' promotional efforts.

Entry Checklist

To enter the contest, applicants will be required to submit the following:

- 1) Summary of local food procurement during the 2025-2026 school year**
 - Brief description of local foods served and featured during the 2025-2026 school year, including:
 - List of local, Minnesota grown or raised foods served
 - List of Minnesota farms where products were purchased
 - Frequency that Minnesota grown or raised foods were served
- 2) Summary of Farm to School or Early Care (Farm to Kids) educational activities during the 2025-2026 school year**

- Brief description of applicants' commitment and approach to local food promotion and education, and how connections were made between the cafeteria, classroom, and community throughout the 2025-2026 school year.
 - Examples of potential activities: morning announcements, special events, farmer visits, classroom lessons, social media, newsletters, use of Minnesota grown and/or Harvest of the Month materials, etc.

3) Your Farm to Kids Story

- A brief description (250 words or less) of what inspires applicants' involvement in Farm to Kids and their program's impact.

4) Photos from the 2025-2026 school year

- Up to 7 photos highlight applicants' Farm to Kids efforts, including how applicants served, promoted, and celebrated local foods and farms.
 - Examples of photos: meals that feature local food, salad bars or serving lines, cafeteria displays or marketing materials, samples of social media posts or newsletters, scene from a school/community event, students/staff in the cafeteria activities, etc.
- Photos that include the Minnesota Grown logo or marketing materials are strongly encouraged! For example, a cafeteria display with a Minnesota Grown sign included, or a lunch tray with a Minnesota Grown sticker next to a local food item. School districts can [order free marketing materials](#) from Minnesota Grown, or [request the Minnesota Grown logo file](#) and use it to self-designed promotional materials.

How to Apply

School districts, early care centers, and family day cares will submit their entry for the *Minnesota Grown Cream of the Crop Awards* through an online form. To do this, follow these steps:

1. [Create an account with Minnesota Department of Agriculture online platform](#)
2. **Click "Apply"** to see a list of open applications
3. **Select the appropriate application** within the portal:
 - i. 2026 Minnesota Grown Cream of the Crop Awards – K-12 Schools and School Districts
 - ii. 2026 Minnesota Grown Cream of the Crop Awards – Early Care Centers
 - iii. 2026 Minnesota Grown Cream of the Crop Awards – Family Day Cares
4. **Review the application** before you get started
 - a. Click "Preview" to review the application in advance
 - b. Click "Question list" to download a PDF of the application questions
 - c. Click "Apply" to begin your application

5. **Upload required information and photos** anytime during the contest period – you can return at any time to add more information, edit your responses, etc.
 - a. Please only submit photos in the provided upload slots on the application. Any outside links with photos or marketing materials will not be considered as part of the submission.
 - b. Make sure to review contest rules as you finalize your entry.
6. **Submit your entry by 4 p.m. on March 20, 2026.** Incomplete entries will not be considered.

Entries should be uploaded into the online application portal. If you cannot utilize the online portal or have questions, contact Izzy Bajek at izzy.bajek@state.mn.us.

Resources for a Successful Entry

Applicants are encouraged to use the following resources for planning and executing their Farm to Kids activities.

- [Request the Minnesota Grown Logo](#) to use for self-designed promotional materials
- Find farmers using the [Minnesota Grown Wholesale Directory](#)
- [Order free Minnesota Grown marketing materials](#) such as posters, stickers, and label cards to use for your Farm to Kids promotions
- [Minnesota Harvest of the Month](#) also offers free marketing materials (stickers, posters, salad bar clings, etc.) as well as educational resources and recipes to support Farm to Kids efforts

Award Categories

1) **Cream of the Crop Winners**

One winner from each category will be selected. Scoring will be based on applicants' promotion and procurement of Minnesota grown and raised foods during the 2025-2026 school year.

- School District of the Year
- Early Care Center of the Year
- Family Day Care of the Year



2) Outstanding in the Field Honors

Additional applicants will be honored across three levels:

- Golden Drumstick Honorees
- Silver Squash Honorees
- Bronze Berry Honorees



3) Producer Appreciation Pick

Applicants will have the opportunity to nominate a Minnesota Grown producer that has been an outstanding partner in their Farm to Kids program. Reviewers will randomly select a nominated producer to be the 2026 Producer Appreciation Pick.



Judging Criteria

Judging Criteria (up to 100 points)

Scores will be awarded based on local purchasing and educational/promotional activities during the 2025-2026 school year.

Judging Criteria	Up to 100 points
<p>Local Procurement</p> <p>Use of local foods in meals, including number of Minnesota farms/businesses purchased from and frequency of local foods served.</p>	Up to 45 points
<p>Education</p> <p>Student engagement and integration of Farm to School or Farm to Early Care in curriculum.</p>	Up to 25 points
<p>Community Connections</p> <p>Promotional and communication efforts to highlight local foods and foster connections between students, families, and Minnesota farmers and producers.</p>	Up to 15 points
<p>Farm to Kids</p> <p>Narrative overview of the program’s successes and impact.</p>	Up to 10 points
<p>Photos</p> <p>Demonstration of Farm to School or Farm to Early Care efforts.</p>	Up to 5 points

Applicants will be scored by a review panel. One school district, early care center, and family day care will be selected as Cream of the Crop winners. All other applicants will be considered for Outstanding in the Field Honors.

Award Announcement and Prizes

Winners and honorees will be announced in early May.

Winners of the *Minnesota Grown Cream of the Crop Awards* (School District, Early Care, and Family Day Care of the Year) will each receive:

- Exclusive rights to use *Minnesota Grown Cream of the Crop* branding for the award year
- Commemorative plaque

- Cream of the Crop Winner apron
- Farmer Trading Cards designed and printed by the MDA for your students

Outstanding in the Field Honorees (Bronze Berry, Silver Squash, and Golden Drumstick) will receive:

- Exclusive rights to use *Minnesota Grown Outstanding in the Field* branding for the award year
- Signed certificate
- Cream of the Crop Honoree buttons

Privacy Notice

All information and materials provided by entrants to the MDA as part of the *Minnesota Grown Cream of the Crop Awards* are legally classified as public data under Minnesota law. This means that any member of the public has a right to view and/or request copies of contest submissions, and all associated information and materials, at any time and for any reason.

1. **No Confidentiality:** Photographs submitted to Minnesota Grown and the MDA as part of this contest will not be treated as confidential, private, or otherwise not public. By submitting a photograph, you affirm that you are not including or disclosing any trade secrets or other confidential information, including without limitation confidential information of any third party, in any photographs.
2. **Non-Infringing Materials:** By submitting a photograph, you hereby represent and warrant that: (a) you are above the age of majority in the jurisdiction of your residence; (b) the photograph is original to you, you personally are the photographer of the photograph and that you are the owner of all right, title and interest in and to the photograph and have the right to grant the rights granted herein or, alternatively, you have obtained all necessary rights and permissions to use and submit the photograph in connection with Minnesota Grown and the MDA and to provide all the rights specified herein; and (c) the photograph and the use thereof as contemplated herein does not and will not violate or infringe any law or regulation or the rights of any third party, including, without limitation, any copyright, trademark, patent, or any rights of publicity or privacy, or any other intellectual property, personal, or proprietary rights.
3. **Permissions:** Except where prohibited by law, by submitting a photograph you grant permission to Minnesota Grown and the MDA to use the photo without limitation, for promotional, advertising, marketing, awareness, outreach, or educational purposes without further permission or compensation.

4. **General Release:** By submitting a photograph, you release Minnesota Grown and the MDA and all of their respective employees, officers, directors, contractors, and agents from any liability whatsoever, and waive any and all causes of action, related to any claims, costs, injuries, losses, or damages of any kind arising out of rights of publicity or privacy, defamation or portrayal in a false light, whether intentional or unintentional, whether under a theory of contract, tort (including negligence), warranty or other theory.

5. **Intellectual Property Notice:** While photo submitters retain all rights to their images, the submitter grants permission for unrestricted use of the image, including people in the image, to Minnesota Grown and the MDA to utilize the image in future publications, exhibits, on its Internet site and social media accounts to promote the functions and values of Minnesota Grown and the MDA. Minnesota Grown or the MDA may alter the image for their use, including but not limited to adding text over the image.