

The process of preparing and staging your exhibits

by Graeme Davis

While much of the challenge of exhibiting is growing your exhibits to as close to perfection as possible, part of the challenge is getting what you have grown to look as good as it possibly can on the show bench.

I will break the process down into five components:

1. The week before the show
2. The day before the show
3. Getting your exhibits to the show
4. Getting the exhibits onto the show bench
5. Getting them just right.

Doing all five of these correctly makes a big difference to your exhibits.

1. The week before the show

Preparing for a show begins about 7 days beforehand.

Download the Show schedule from the HSOC website. Read the schedule as it provides guidance as to what is expected. New exhibitors can generally enter the novice classes to “learn the ropes” and get to understand the process and what some of the terms used mean. Don’t worry, they really are not that complicated!

Having a careful look around the garden a week before the show allows you to identify what you might have available to exhibit. Some things might need to be tied up or have something moved away from them so as not to damage the flower. You can also identify what might need picking early in the week to try to keep it for the show or to open inside during the week. And, for the particularly obsessed, what might need to be covered for the week. In my case, I cover giant and large dahlias with umbrellas to reduce sun, dew and rain damage.

- Most dahlias are best picked 24 hours in advance and kept in a cool dark room. But some, such as small cactus and open-centred flowers, are best picked 48 hours or more in advance – again kept in a cool dark room. And pick the dahlias before the sun gets on them when they are full of water.
- For roses it depends on the variety but most are best picked about 24 to 48 hours in advance and placed in water in a cool room, allowing them to come out more steadily.
- Roses can be held in the fridge for a week depending on the variety but they are at their best if picked a couple of days before the show and allowed to open in a cool dark place. Thursday morning is my preferred time for a Saturday show but that requires a bit of judgement as to how much they will progress in the next couple of days. Exhibition roses can be dressed up on the Friday evening to try to make them look bigger and more symmetrical – I use tissues but whatever plug you use, make sure you can find it again to take it out before judging, preferably a distinct colour from the rose.
- Dutch iris can be held in the fridge for a week or two. Bearded iris can be held for a few days but they tend to take up a lot of space and are a challenge.
- Daffodils will keep for a week or more in the fridge but most people don’t enjoy them with their food! Otherwise, they will keep in a cool dark place for a number of days before the show.

During the week keep a careful eye on the garden and select what you think you might be able to use. In some cases, you can start to prepare the exhibit while it is still growing. For example, with dahlias you can start to remove damaged florets during the week to give the flower a chance to adjust.

Select what you want to enter. If you are in doubt or have questions, contact Kitty, the Show Secretary.

**And don't forget to put your entries in with the Show Secretary:
entries close at 7pm on the Thursday before each show – early entries would be
appreciated.**

2. The day before the show

Time for the big picking exercise! Most of your entries will be picked the day before the show. Early morning is by far the best time to pick most things. One trick is not to over-pick – select what you need plus a few spares. If you have been looking carefully for the week prior you should already know what you are going to pick. Having too many to choose from is not helpful – make your choices when you pick and then again when you are packing things to transport to the show.

You should have a very good idea what is going in which sections before you pack, so that when you get to the show it is simply a matter of assembly. There might still be some choices to make at the show – adjustments are often necessary but it makes the show morning much easier if you know what goes where.

When I go to the Royal Easter Show I know what is going in what class so I can just stage and put them on the bench – it makes the job very easy.

3. Getting your exhibits to the show

Transporting what you have grown is important – you need a plan for how you are getting all your exhibits to the show in the best possible condition. Plastic bottles and crates of various types which hold the bottles in place work just fine – plastic is much better than glass as it weighs a lot less and does not shatter!

Pack your exhibits carefully. I have wires which hold my dahlias in place so they do not move around but this requires them to be packed into the bottles tightly and for the bottles not to move. Packing for the Royal Easter Show takes about 3 hours!

Of course, going to a local show you can make a couple of trips, meaning packing is a bit easier but you still need to think about how they will travel.

4. Getting your exhibits onto the show bench

If this is your first time exhibiting, here are some special tips on what to do when you arrive at the hall:

- *Say hello to everyone! Find yourself a spot to set up. Don't stagger in with an arm full of flowers - wander in with your bag of set up stuff (snip/cutters, packing, pens, labels) and find yourself a spot/table. Then bring in your entries.*

- *Find the vases you need to use - the green 2-piece vases are kept in suitcases. There are two sizes of top and a single size base. They simply fit together and a twist will help them stay together. If you have questions, do not hesitate to ask!*
- *Collect your entry tickets from the Show Secretary table - they will be in an envelope with your name on it. You will get one entry card per entry. It will have the class number and exhibitor number on it. When you place your entry on the bench in the relevant class simply place the entry card face down in front of the entry. If you are missing an entry card do not panic! There will probably be someone around who can help sort it out!*
- *Walk around the show tables to familiarise yourself with where the classes are that you entered. It is easier to know where you are going than to wander around lost with a vase full of flowers.*
- *Sort out your entries. Have a look at what others are doing to get an idea and don't hesitate to ask for help!*

If you've done this before, here's a reminder of the key tasks:

- *Get yourself set up to do the job!*
- *Unload your exhibits and get them into the hall on or under the table you are using.*
- *Have your tools of the trade organised – snips, packing material (oasis, phone books etc), brushes to clean flowers etc.*
- *Get the vases organised. If it is a big show, I know exactly how many vases I need for my exhibits and add a few spares. I find an offsider is very helpful for this!*

The next steps are for every exhibitor.

The vases need water so either use the water you used to transport the exhibits or bring a container to get water to fill the vases.

If you know what is going in which section it gets really easy – put the exhibits together. Make sure they are presented to look at the judge and be seen in the best possible light.

It is important to have something to hold the exhibit in place in the vase so the flower does not wobble around – newspaper or kitchen paper can be used to good effect. Some exhibitors also use oasis. The trick in any case seems to be to put in some water to start with, place the flower(s) and wedge them in, then top up the water.

If you are entering a collection, have a plan about how you are going to put that collection together – which flowers are going where. Think about size and colour combinations. For example, I have one daffodil variety I have won a champion with each time I have shown it. It has very good form but is slightly smaller than most of the varieties I would normally show in a championship. Rather than show it among the larger flowers I have chosen on each occasion to show it among slightly smaller flowers so as not to highlight that it is slightly smaller.

If you know what is going where, I am a great believer in getting your entries out on the bench as early as possible. If necessary, you can adjust them as you go.

A few things to remember.

- Once a stem has been cut, it cannot be put back on – make sure you keep enough.
- Water is a necessity not an optional extra.
- Friday night is not Saturday morning – things change so make sure you look at them in the morning before judging
- Careful attention to detail can make an average entry look ok – poor staging can make a good entry look bad.
- If you need help, ask before you start.

What are the judges looking for?

The first thing judges everywhere notice is something I will call '**condition**'. This is a universal thing. Condition means asking "how fresh is it?" We do not want to give a prize to a dead entry. Is there damage? Does it look "clean"? Does the entry jump up and say "I am perfect"? All this applies to the flower and/or the foliage. Sometimes the weather does not cooperate and it is very difficult to get "clean" entries. Please remember that everyone suffers from the same problems and strive for as clean as possible.

The second is **balance or symmetry**. Is everything in balance or are there parts of the entry that are "out of balance"? For individual flowers, that often means being able to look down the centre line and see the same thing one side vs the other side. For a stem, is it in balance? Same for a vase.

The third is "**does it look like it should look?**" Is it consistent with the "standards"? You need to have a good idea what the standards are but that is often surprisingly simple. Ask if you do not know. Interestingly, it is on this that the international differences in interpretation are often the largest.

The fourth thing is **colour**. Is the entry bright and the colour clean? Remember, judges are human and will have preferences as much as they might try to avoid it. It is not up to the exhibitor to play to those preferences but rather to make sure they produce the best entry they can.

The fifth is "**does the entry look at the judge or does it look to the sky or study the judge's boots?**" Is it held well and securely? Staging matters here – if you are putting things in vases they should not move around, and do your best to have them look at the judge.

The final element is **size**. Size can help the entry to be more 'impressive' and show off how well grown an entry might be. Size, however, can be a double-edged sword. The bigger the entry, the greater any problems in symmetry and form.

5. Getting them just right

Try to get them looking as good as you can when you first put the entry in – no point putting them up any other way. However, one of the important things to do is leave yourself enough time to come back half an hour before judging and "fix them up".

It is amazing what you see when you come back to an entry.

Get them as good as you can, then take a photo with your phone. It is really revealing what shows up in a photo. Almost inevitably you will see how the entry can be improved.

Then sit back and relax!

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