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# *Preparing Cut Flowers for Exhibit*



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**E**xhibiting flowers in shows and fairs can be fun. You and others will enjoy your flowers and houseplants when you display them at home or share them at community events.

*You can learn by exhibiting. Others can learn from you as you share your cultural knowledge and exhibiting skills. Exhibits are judged against show standards. The judge's evaluation helps you learn how to make this year's efforts even better. You can use this information to extend the life of cut flowers in your home, too.*

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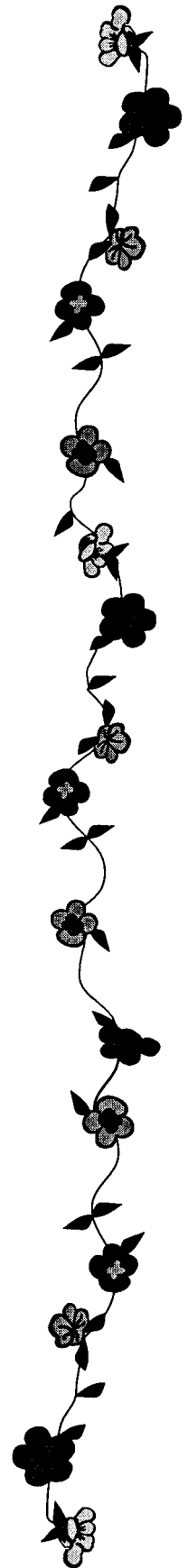
## Selecting and Harvesting Flowers for Exhibit

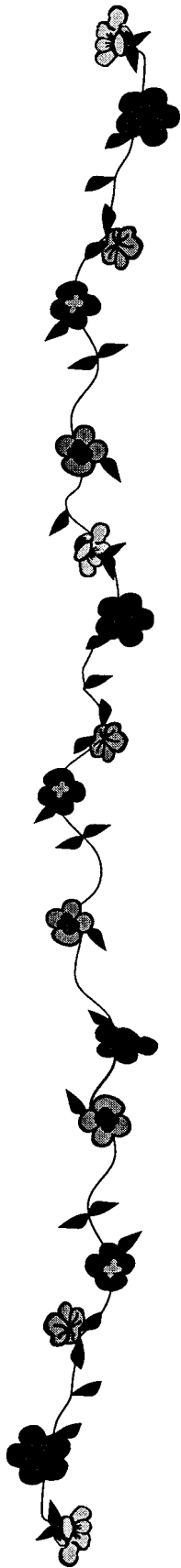
The best stage of development for cutting flowers depends on flower form. Spike-form flowers, which open from the bottom up – such as gladiolus, delphinium, stocks, and snapdragons – should be cut when the bottom florets are open and in perfect condition. A good proportion of open florets is two-thirds open to one-third developing buds. The lower portion of the spike should not show signs of overmaturity. The lowest florets should not have dropped off, have browning petal edges, have shriveled or have faded color. The spike should be straight to the tip, and the stem should be sturdy. Flowers should be uniformly distributed along the spike with no voids. The florets should be open in a consistent progression of maturity. That is, they should progress from mature, to slightly less mature, to less mature, to immature, to tight bud. Some spike-form flowers, such as liatris, open from the tip downward. The principles are the same, just in reverse order, from the tip down instead of from the bottom up.

Round-form flowers – such as chrysanthemums, daisies, dahlias, zinnias, marigolds, and asters – should be cut when fully developed and outer petals fold out gracefully. The center petals are tighter than the outer petals, but not so immature as to be green.

You will know the round-form flower is overmature when the outer petals begin to shrivel and fade, or reproductive parts become visible in the centers. Round-form flower standards should be exhibited as single-stem disbuds. This means only one flower is left at the tip of the stem — all others are removed. This procedure, called “disbudding,” should be done early in the stage of flower development. Roll the side buds to remove them and minimize the scar left behind. Young side shoots should be removed as soon as they can be seen. Do not allow any stem stubs to remain. Disbudding produces a single, large bloom at the tip of the stem. The earlier disbudding is done, the more symmetrical the flower will be.

A fair book or flower show schedule includes classes for flower sprays. A spray is a single main stem with blooms on side branches. Pompom and decorative-type chrysanthemums, ageratum, and sweet peas are examples of flowers that can be exhibited as sprays. Judges look at the number of buds, the branching and vigor of the spray, as well as the quality of individual flowers. All lilies should be exhibited with as many open flowers as possible. Each petal on every flower should be in good condition, not wilted, shriveled or bruised. Flowers should be uniformly distributed throughout the spray, and the spray should be symmetrical in shape. The position of





## ***Tips***

**Simply put, the judges are looking for as perfect a specimen as possible.**

**Be sure to wash your specimen to remove mud or dirt splatters.**

**Clean off any water spots.**

**Take off any parts of the specimen that are spent or dry and browned. Try not to leave obvious scars.**

flowers in the spray should maximize *floriferousness*, the total, overall visual impact of the floral display.

Flowers should be cut in the evening or early morning, when plant temperatures are coolest. Use a clean, sharp knife. Try to choose unpollinated flowers. Once a flower has been pollinated, the petals are no longer needed and fade quickly. Cutting with a sharp knife results in an even cut without obstructing any of the water-conducting tissue in the stem. Always cut the stem several inches longer than necessary because further trimming may be needed. Do not cut stems with scissors because they pinch the ends of the stems, closing off the water-conducting vessels. Remove the leaves from the portion of the stem that will be in water. Foliage covered with water will rot, and

cause discolored water and stem blockage. Blocked stems are unable to supply necessary water to the living flower.

## ***Conditioning Flowers***

In the garden, immediately after cutting, place the stems in lukewarm water (100 to 110° F). Move the freshly cut flowers to a cool location to condition for 15 to 20 minutes. “Conditioning” or “hardening” reduces the chances of stem blockage and promotes the quick water uptake necessary for long flower life. Most garden flowers should be placed in a refrigerator set at 35 to 40°F until put on display. Cooling retards the maturing process so flowers do not fade or become overmature before display and judging. Never store flowers in a refrigerator with fruits or vegetables. The ethylene gas released by fruits and vegetables reduces vase life.

Stems should be recut after conditioning, just before exhibiting. A clean cut opens up new vessels for water uptake. Fresh cuts should be made under water so that air does not fill the exposed vessels, blocking water uptake.

## ***Containers***

The type of container used to exhibit flowers is important. Containers should be simple so they do not detract from the beauty of the flower or plant. Single stem cut flowers should be exhibited in a clear, narrow bottle or jar, such as a soft drink bottle. Many fairs and flower shows specify the type of exhibition container required. Vases

### ***Round-form flowers***

- Cut when fully developed.
- Exhibit in single stem disbuds.
- Remove all stem stubs.
- No disbudding scars.

### ***Spike-form flowers***

- Cut when bottom florets are open and in perfect condition.
- Florets should be two-thirds open and one-third developing buds.
- The spike should be straight to the tip.
- No voids.
- Proper progression of maturity.

## ***Tips***

**Select specimens from healthy plants. Points are deducted for discoloration or malformation due to nutrient deficiency.**

**Points are deducted for blemishes resulting from disease and insect damage. Select specimens that are blemish-free.**

**Flowers to be entered should be at their peak, neither immature nor past their prime. They should not be faded from age or sun. Those with straight stems are best.**

**Groom blossoms with a soft brush to dust off pollen and dirt. It's a good idea to bring these tools with you to the show to give your specimen a last minute clean-up.**

must be clean, since dirt or bacteria can clog conductive tissue.

Houseplant containers should be clean, and in proportion to the plant size. The color, texture, and style of the container should complement the plant, and not draw attention away from it.

## ***Grooming***

Grooming flower specimens for exhibit is the last preparation step. Remove all soil and spray residue from the foliage, stems, and flowers. Remove loose soil with a gentle spray of water from either a faucet or a syringe. Be careful not to damage the foliage or petals.

Grooming also involves smoothing the petals, removing faded blooms,

petals, and ragged leaves. Remember, grooming should not be evident. Lower ratings may result if judges see signs of grooming, such as removal of essential petals or leaves, stubs, or visible wounds.

## ***Transporting***

Safe movement from your home to the fair or show is fundamental. Just one little slip in transporting your entries could ruin all of your efforts. Most mechanical injury occurs in transit. To transport individual flowers, use soft drink cartons with bottles partially filled with water. Protect each bloom from sunlight, drafts, and bruising by wrapping it gently in tissue paper.

## ***Labeling***

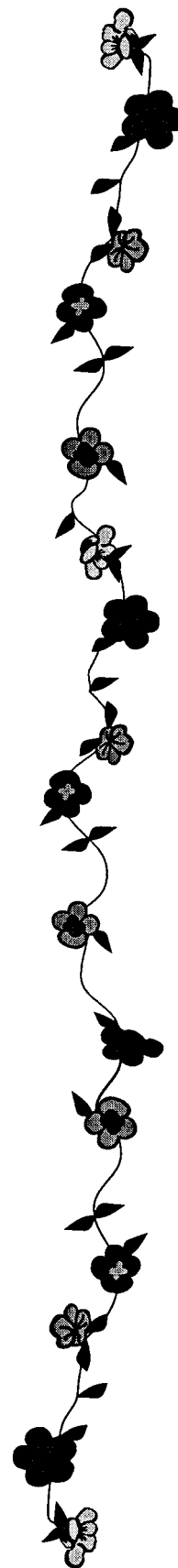
Label all flower and plant exhibits with the plant name and variety. For example, a correct dahlia exhibit could read "Dahlia, 'Lilac Time.'" "Dahlia" is the plant name and "Lilac Time" is the variety or cultivar.

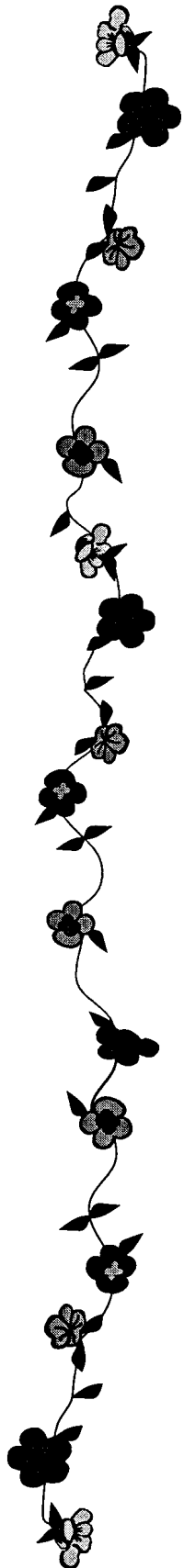
Correct labeling of exhibits is important because the purpose of flower shows and fairs is education. Fair-goers and other exhibitors may be interested in growing varieties that exhibit well. Judges may place an exhibit lower if it is not labeled or is labeled incorrectly.

## ***Terms Used Exhibiting Flowers and Plants***

**Color** — The color should be vivid and bright, whether it is a dark shade or a pastel. Fading colors on petals due to overmaturity is undesirable. Foliage color should be typical of the plant type, whether dark green or variegated.

**Condition** — The condition of a plant or flower is based on the appearance of the specimen when it is judged. For the condition criteria, judges consider mechanical injury, bruising, immaturity, age, and weather damage. Insect and





disease damage may be considered under “condition” or “cultural perfection” if they are listed in the scale of points.

**Cultural perfection** — Cultural perfection is a criterion judges use to evaluate the cultural techniques used in growing a flower or plant. Proper fertilization, watering, pest control, disbudding, dividing, removal of spent blooms, and quality potting soil are cultural techniques that are evident in the appearance of flowers or plants. A judge may deduct for an injury caused by poor growing conditions.

**Floret** — A small individual flower in a cluster of flowers on a stem.

**Form** — The shape that is the true or characteristic form of a flower or plant. Poor form may result from mechanical injury, insect and disease damage, or poor cultural practices.

**Grooming** — Clean flowers and plants to remove dirt and residues, as well as dead foliage or flowers. Grooming should not alter the typical features on the plants or flowers.

**Size** — The size of a flower or plant should be as large as the variety allows under proper growing conditions. The stem and foliage should be proportional to the bloom size. Large blooms are not desirable if they are poor in condition or form.

**Spike** — A lengthened flower cluster in which the florets are stemless.

**Spray** — A main stem with side branches and blooms on all sides.

**Stem and Foliage** — The stem supporting the blooms should be strong and in proportion to the flower. Points are deducted if the stem is crooked, weak,

## *Tips*

**For cut specimens, choose a container that is in attractive proportion to the specimen. The container must be clear glass, however the shape of the container itself is not important.**

**Remove any leaves that are below the water level of the container in which the specimen is placed.**

**Where two or more specimens are required for a class, choose specimens that are as nearly alike in size, color, and shape as possible. Uniformity is important in judging these classes. If you have just one huge blossom of a class and several smaller blossoms, leave the big blossom at home and enter the size-matched smaller blossoms.**

damaged or too short. If a stem grows with foliage attached, such as on roses or chrysanthemums, it should be left on the stem. The leaves should be in good condition and in proportional size to the bloom and stem.

**Substance** — The material of which the flower is made. It should be strong, firm, crisp, and fresh. Overmaturity often brings about a lack of substance, wilting, or thinning at the petal edges.

**Symmetry** — Beauty due to a balanced proportion of parts on a flower or plant.



*Adapted from Iowa State University Extension, 4-H 464. Information provided by Elaine Holmstrom, Shawnee County Extension Master Gardener, and revised and prepared by Christy Collingham, horticulture leader; and Alan Stevens, floriculture and ornamental horticulture. Reviewed by Jim Adams, Specialist, 4-H and Youth Programs.*

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