



# Preparing Cut Flowers and Houseplants for Exhibits



Participating in flower shows and fairs can be fun and rewarding. Good exhibits help others learn about various types of flowers and plants. This publication will

help you prepare to be an exhibitor.

## What do I need to know before the show?

After you know the show date and location, you'll want to read the fair book or flower show rules. The earlier you read them, the more time you'll have to find answers and make sure you understand what is expected. Many shows ask for pre-registration by a certain date. The rules also will state the time when plants need to be at the show site.

## What happens at a flower show?

When you check in, some one will help you find where to put your exhibits. Later, a judge will look at all the exhibits.

You may have an opportunity to visit with the judge about your exhibit. If not, try to watch and listen during the judging. This is a good way to learn how to evaluate a plant's appearance and what characteristics are important. Some shows may have a scribe who writes the judge's comments on an evaluation sheet for the exhibitor.

## How are exhibits judged?

Most flower shows use a point scale that includes categories or criteria with a specific number of points for each. The number of points per category often varies but the total is usually 100.

Some plant societies, such as the American Rose Society, have a specific point scale. For other shows, the judge or a committee decides what the point scale will be for that show. Always read the fair book or flower show rules for specific guidelines.

### *SAMPLE Scorecard for cut flowers*

| Category           | Possible Points |
|--------------------|-----------------|
| Color              | 15              |
| Form               | 15              |
| Substance          | 10              |
| Amount of bloom    | 10              |
| Stem and foliage   | 10              |
| Size               | 15              |
| Condition/Grooming | 25              |
| Total              | 100             |

## How do I prepare flowers for an exhibit?

You can't control what the weather does to your plants but you do control how you prepare your exhibit. Remember that different shows may use different rules. Always review the rules before you go out to cut your flowers. The guidelines on pages 2 and 5 to 7 give examples of what might be included in a list of rules.

### • Select the best

If you can see something wrong with one of your flowers, the judge will see it too. Remember that flowers go through different stages from bud to overmature. The guidelines on pages 5 to 7 suggest a "best stage of maturity" for several different flowers.

### • Harvest with care

Plan to cut your flowers in the evening or early morning. Always cut the stem several inches longer than necessary to allow for later trimming. Use a clean, sharp knife to make a smooth, even cut. Scissors tend to pinch the ends of the stems and close off the water-conducting vessels.

Remove any leaves on 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 needed water to the living flower and make the exhibit deteriorate more rapidly.

### • Condition for longer life

"Conditioning" or "hardening" reduces the chances of stem blockage and promotes the quick water uptake necessary for long flower life. Take a container of lukewarm water (100° to 110°F) along to the garden. Immediately after cutting, place the stems in the water. When you return inside, place the container and flowers in a refrigerator set at 35° to 40°F for 3 to 12 hours. Cooling permits the plant to take up more water than it releases and helps hold flower freshness. Never store flowers in a refrigerator with fresh fruits or vegetables; they release ethylene gas which will reduce the vase life of the flowers.

Plan to recut the stems after conditioning and just prior to exhibiting. A new clean cut opens up vessels for water uptake. Fresh cuts on woody stems, such as roses, should be made under water, if possible, so that air does not fill the exposed vessels and block water uptake.

Floral preservatives can be added to the water to extend the vase life of cut flowers. Commercial preservatives are available from florist shops, hobby stores, or garden centers. Placing an aspirin or penny in the water is not effective as a floral preservative.

### • Choose the right container

Some fairs and flower shows may require a specific type of container. If none is specified in the rules, use a simple container that does not detract from the flower. Clear, narrow-necked bottles and jars are often used.

For best display, flowers should be about 1 1/2 to 2 times the height of the container. For example, a 10-inch tall container is best used with flowers having stems 15 to 20 inches above the container rim.

### • Groom for the show

Remove all soil and spray residue from the foliage, stems, and flowers. Remove loose soil with a gentle spray of water. Be careful not to damage the foliage or petals.

Faded blooms, petals, and ragged leaves can be removed but lower ratings may result if there is visible evidence of grooming—such as stubs or wounds.

### • Pack carefully

Getting your flowers to the show can be a challenge. One way to reduce possible damage is by putting individual flowers in soft drink or other narrow-necked bottles that are partially filled with water and placed in cardboard soft drink cartons or

surrounded by newspapers or packing peanuts inside a box. Wrapping each bloom gently in tissue paper can help protect it from sunlight, drafts, and bruising.

### • Label correctly

Correct and complete labeling helps make your exhibit a teaching tool for others. Most show guidelines ask for both plant name and cultivar, if available; for example: Dahlia, 'Lilac Time'. Judges may place an exhibit lower if it is not labeled or if it is labeled incorrectly.

## Guidelines for cut-flower exhibits

Always check and follow the specific guidelines provided for the show you are entering.

Many types of flowers can be exhibited. If the particular flower you want to enter is not included below or on pages 5 to 7, follow the guidelines given for a flower that has a similar form or structure. All flowers for exhibit should be in prime condition. If any of the following terms are unfamiliar, check the list of term definitions on pages 3 and 4.

### General guidelines for round-form flowers

*Examples: aster, standard chrysanthemum, cosmos, dahlia, daisy, dianthus, marigold, peony, annual phlox, rose, and zinnia*

- Cut when fully developed as indicated by the outer petals folding out gracefully. At this stage the center petals are tighter than the outer petals but are not an immature green.
- Avoid exhibiting overmature flowers where the center is visible or any outer petals have begun to shrivel, fade, or curl.

- Round form flower standards are exhibited as single stem disbuds. This means only one flower is left at the tip of the stem. Young side shoots should be removed as soon as they can be seen. This procedure of "disbudding" produces a single, large bloom at the tip of the stem.

### General guidelines for spike-form flowers

*Examples: celosia, delphinium, gladiolus, salvia, and snapdragon*

- Cut when the bottom florets are open and in perfect condition. The ideal choice has about one-third of the florets fully open, about one-third showing color as buds, and about one-third that are still green.

- All florets should still be present and in good condition (not shriveled); none should have browned petal edges or have faded color.

- The spike should be straight to the tip, and the stem should be sturdy.

### General guidelines for spray-form flowers

*Examples: ageratum, pompon and decorative type chrysanthemum, daylily, lily, and sweet pea*

- A spray is a single main stem with blooms on side branches. Judges look at the number of buds, the branching and vigor of the spray, as well as the quality of individual flowers.

- Daylilies and 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.

## Tips for exhibiting flower arrangements

- Follow the show guidelines.
- The overall effect of the arrangement should be pleasing to the eye. Color, space, texture, and shape are important.
- Use high-quality plant materials with no wilting, color fading or obvious damage. The condition of individual flowers and foliage is less important than when they are exhibited separately.
- Create arrangements that are well balanced and do not appear to tilt to either side. Consider the visual “weight” of individual flowers and arrange so both sides appear equal.
- Plant materials should be in good proportion to each other and to the container. The length of stems and the size of flowers and foliage affect overall proportion.
- Avoid using containers that detract from the plant materials.
- Pay attention to construction details. Insert plant materials so that the foam or other material used to hold stems is not visible. If the design is intended to be viewed from only one side, fill the back side with foliage so it looks finished.

*SAMPLE Scorecard  
for flower arrangements*

| Category  | Possible Points |
|---|-----------------|
| Color harmony                                     | 25              |
| Design, balance, proportion                       | 25              |
| Condition   | 20              |
| Suitability of material and relation to container | 15              |
| Distinction and originality                       | 10              |
| Construction                                      | 5               |
| <b>Total</b>                                      | <b>100</b>      |

## Tips for exhibiting houseplants

- Follow the show guidelines.
- All potted plants should be free of insects and diseases.
- Foliage plants are judged on the quality and appearance of leaves and stems. Colors should be bright, clear, and typical of the cultivar.
- Flowering plants are judged for their display of flowers but should not show obvious foliage damage. A comparison of the number of open flowers and buds is typically used to evaluate similar entries.
- Plant size should be above average in spread, fullness, and height. Good branching is often more desirable than extra height.
- Plant shape should be symmetrical. A one-sided or unevenly developed plant indicates that it has not been rotated regularly and has grown toward the light source.
- Plants that are “above average” or show unusual, desirable characteristics often earn extra points.
- Use clean containers that are in proportion to plant size. The color, texture, and style of the container should complement the plant without drawing attention away from it.
- Show rules may specify ownership for a minimum time, such as 6 months. Plants that appear to be recently potted may be disqualified.
- Groom carefully. Lower ratings may result if signs of grooming are visible, such as removal of essential petals or leaves, stubs, or wounds.
- Most show guidelines ask for both the common and scientific names; for example: heartleaf

philodendron, *Philodendron cordatum*. Lower scores may be given if it is not labeled or labeled incorrectly.

- One way to avoid plant damage during transportation to the show is by placing the container in a box with newspapers stuffed between the pot and the box. Allow plenty of room for the plant, but pack tightly to prevent it from tipping over.

*SAMPLE Scorecard  
for foliage houseplants*

| Category            | Possible Points |
|---------------------|-----------------|
| Form (shape)        | 10              |
| Condition           | 30              |
| Cultural perfection | 20              |
| Size                | 10              |
| Symmetry            | 15              |
| Container           | 10              |
| Name (label)        | 5               |
| <b>Total</b>        | <b>100</b>      |

## Terms used in exhibiting flowers and houseplants

**Balance** – The visual “weight” of an exhibit should look equal on either side of an imaginary line drawn through the center. A flower arrangement that appears to tilt to either side has poor balance.

**Color** – Good color is uniform, vivid, clear, bright, and typical of plant type. Flower colors should not show muddiness or fading. Foliage color should show no evidence of sunburn, scorching, bleaching, or uncharacteristic spotting.

**Common name** – Plants may have one or several commonly known names. The same common name may refer to two different plants. Some plants, such as zinnia, have the same common and scientific name.

**Condition** – A judging term that reflects how close an entry is to its ideal stage of development at the time of judging.

**Cultivar** – A cultivar is the cultivated variety of a plant and was developed through a controlled breeding or hybridizing program. Single quote marks are used to indicate a cultivar name, such as *Zinnia angustifolia* ‘Crystal White’.

**Cultural perfection** – Cultural perfection is a judging category that may be used to evaluate how the flower or plant was grown. The appearance of the flower or plant will show evidence of cultural techniques, such as proper fertilization, watering, pest control, disbudding, dividing, removal of spent blooms, and quality potting soil. A judge may deduct for any injury caused by poor growing conditions.

**Disbudding** – Removing the side shoots of a flower is often called disbudding. This technique helps produce one large single flower per stem on plants that would otherwise have branched stems with smaller flowers.

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

**Form** – A judging term that refers to a plant’s ideal characteristics. For example, the petals of a single daisy are expected to be equal in length and similar in shape. To win all possible points for form, a flower must have a shape true to its type. Poor form may result from mechanical injury, insect and disease damage, or poor cultural practices.

**Grooming** – A step in preparing flowers or plants to exhibit that may include removing dirt or dead foliage or flowers. Grooming should not alter the typical features on the plant or flower.

**Proportion** – A term that refers to the relationship between parts.

**Scientific name** – Each plant has only one scientific name that is given according to an international set of rules. The first part is always capitalized and identifies the genus to which the plant belongs. The second part is the species name and is not capitalized. Both genus and species names are underlined or printed in italics. Checking catalogs or plant labels for the scientific name is a good way to make sure you get the specific plant you want.

**Size** – A judging category that helps evaluate how a plant has been grown. 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 in poor condition or form.

**Spacing** – A term that may be used in judging to indicate the closeness of florets in a spike- or spray-type flower.

**Spike** – A lengthened flower cluster in which the florets are stem-less.

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

**Standard** – A term sometimes used to identify round-form flowers that are exhibited as a single flower at the tip of a stem. Side shoots need to be removed early in flower development to produce the desirable single, large bloom.

**Stem and foliage** – A judging category that evaluates the non-flower part of the specimen. The stem supporting the blooms should be strong and in proportion to the flower. Points are deducted if the stem is crooked, weak, damaged, or too short. If a stem grows with foliage attached, such as roses or chrysanthemums, the foliage should be left on the stem unless they will be in water. The leaves should be in good condition and in proportional size to the bloom and stem.

**Substance** – A judging term that describes the thickness and firmness of flower petals and foliage. Fewer points are given to flowers that show wilting, curling, fading, or browning.

**Symmetry** – A judging term that describes the proportion of parts on a flower or plant. The ideal specimen has a balanced proportion; if a line were drawn from top to bottom through the middle, both sides would look similar and balanced.

**Uniformity** – When a category or class requires more than one flower, the judge is likely to look for blooms that are similar in size, shape, and color on stems cut to equal lengths. Similarly, the leaves of a foliage houseplant are expected to be nearly the same in size and shape.

## Guidelines for Preparing Selected Flowers for Exhibit

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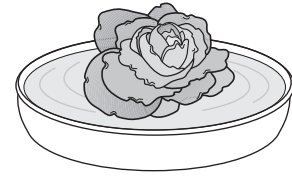
### **Begonia** *Begonia* × *tuberhybrida*

**Best stage of maturity** – Bloom fully open showing no signs of color fading or browning of petal edges

**Faults** – Insect damage, misshapen bloom

**Preparation** – Remove any soil from bloom, clip the bloom from the plant leaving 1/2 inch of stem and gently place into a shallow container with water

**Exhibit** – One blooming plant in a pot or one bloom floating in water



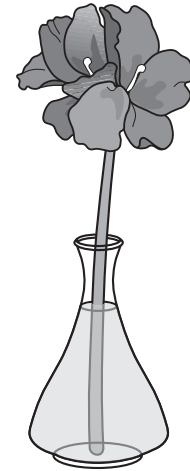
### **Canna** *Canna* × *generalis*

**Best stage of maturity** – Bloom should be fully open with no signs of age

**Faults** – Overmature bloom, seed pods noticeable

**Preparation** – Cut blooms in the coolest parts of the day

**Exhibit** – One stem



### **Celosia** *Celosia argentea* (var. *cristata*, *plumosa*, *spicata*)

**Best stage of maturity** – Flower head full before mature seed is produced

**Faults** – Misshapen flower head, mature seed visible on flower, insect damage to leaves and/or flower, no foliage on specimen

**Preparation** – Clean stem and leaves of soil, remove foliage that may be submerged in water

**Exhibit** – One stem

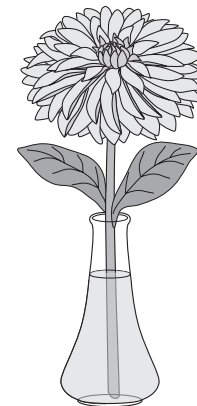
### **Chrysanthemum** *Chrysanthemum* × *morifolium*

**Best stage of maturity** – Blooms should be fully open

**Faults** – Insect or disease damage, soil on specimen, misshapen or faded blooms, exhibiting more than one spray

**Preparation** – Cut sprays and place them in water-filled jars, make sure that no foliage is in the water

**Exhibit** – One spray



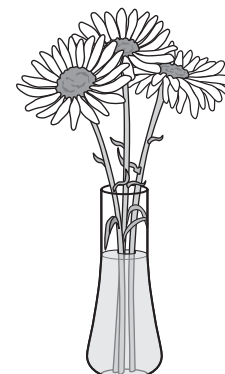
### **Dahlia** *Dahlia* × *hybrida*

**Best stage of maturity** – Blooms should be full with the depth being at least 1/2 the diameter of the flower; blooms should be at a 45° angle; use a wedging device, such as foam, wood, newspaper, etc., to help keep the bloom straight in the container

**Faults** – Insect or disease damage, brown petals (over mature), blooms with a tight green center (immature), lopsided bloom, dull color, crooked or weak stems, no foliage, short stem

**Preparation** – For a Saturday show, dahlias may be cut on Thursday and kept in a cool dark location; use a shape knife or bypass shear; at least one set (2 leaves) must be shown where attached to the stem

**Exhibit** – One large bloom or three small blooms



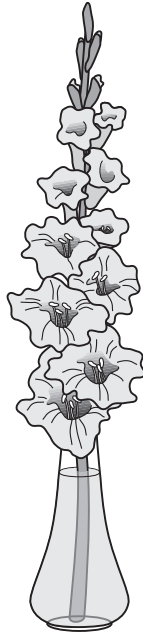
### **Daisy** *Leucanthemum* × *superbum*

**Best stage of maturity** – Blooms fully open

**Faults** – Weak or crooked stems, soil on exhibit, insect or disease damage, brown or drooping petals

**Preparation** – Cut in the coolest parts of the day; remove any soil

**Exhibit** – One or three blooms



### Daylily *Hemerocallis*

**Best stage of maturity** – Specimens need at least one bloom fully open with buds in various stages of development

**Faults** – Insect or disease damage, seedpods present

**Preparation** – Cut the morning of the show because the flowers last for only one day

**Exhibit** – One stem

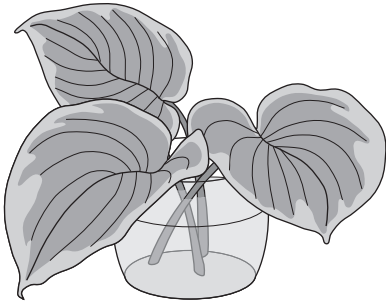
### Gladiolus *Gladiolus hybrids*

**Best stage of maturity** – Spikes should be straight in the container; use the rule of thirds (1/3 of the blooms fully open, 1/3 showing color, 1/3 in tight bud showing no flower color); bottom floret may be removed if over mature (results in a 1 point deduction); use a wedging device, such as foam, wood, newspaper, etc., to help keep the bloom straight in the container

**Faults** – Crooked spikes, insect or disease damage, too many flowers open (over mature), not enough buds open (immature)

**Preparation** – Cut with a sharp knife or bypass shear; place in warm water to encourage more blooms (florets) to open; use cold water or store in a cool place to retard additional blooms from expanding

**Exhibit** – One spike



### Hosta *Hosta*

**Best stage of maturity** – Leaves fully expanded; or 2/3 of flowers on one spike open

**Faults** – Leaves scorched or misshapen, variance in sizes of the three leaves, soil on leaves, insect and/or slug damage; lower flowers faded

**Preparation** – Select the most uniform set of three to exhibit; remove soil

**Exhibit** – Three leaves or one flower spike

### Liatris *Liatris spicata*

**Best stage of maturity** – Spikes should be straight in container; upper blooms should be fully open and lower blooms tight

**Faults** – Crooked stem, browning/fading of upper flowers

**Preparation** – Cut stems with a sharp knife, place in cool water; remove any lower leaves that may be in water

**Exhibit** – One spike



### Marigold *Tagetes erecta, Tagetes patula*

**Best stage of maturity** – Blooms should be in different stages of development (fully open, showing color, tight bud)

**Faults** – Insect damage, soil on foliage or flowers, specimen is not a spray, flowers misshapen

**Preparation** – Cut sprays or stems in the early morning or evening; remove any soil or other residues

**Exhibit** –

**French or signet** – One to three sprays

**African** – Three blooms

## **Oriental/Asiatic Lily** *Lilium* species

**Best stage of maturity** – Specimens need at least one bloom fully open with buds in various stages of development

**Faults** – Misshapen flowers, soil on the exhibit, insect or disease damage, stamens still attached

**Preparation** – Remove any soil, remove stamens from the open flowers (the pollen stains fabric)

**Exhibit** – One stem



## **Petunia** *Petunia* × *hybrida*

**Best stage of maturity** – Select a spray that has blooms in various stages of development fully open, showing color, tight bud if possible

**Faults** – Seed pods present, soil on leaves or flowers; flowers wilted, brown, or misshapen; insect or disease damage

**Preparation** – Remove all soil

**Exhibit** – One spray



## **Rose** *Rosa*

**Best stage of maturity** – Bloom should be half open

**Faults** – Blooms are fully open (full blown), insect or disease damage, tight bud (immature), no foliage, weak stems

**Preparation** – Cut roses in the early morning or in the evening; roses that are at the correct stage of maturity may be kept in a cool or refrigerated area to slow the aging process (avoid storing fruit in the same area to reduce possible damage to the flower); roses may be wrapped with bathroom tissue to hold them from further expansion

**Exhibit** – One stem with one flower or cluster of flowers as appropriate

**Tea** – One stem with one bloom

**Miniature rose** – One bloom or one stem with cluster of blooms

**Grandiflora** – One stem with one bloom or one stem with cluster of blooms

**Floribunda** – One stem with one bloom or one stem with cluster of blooms

**Shrub rose** – One stem with one bloom or one stem with cluster of blooms



## **Snapdragons** *Antirrhinum majus*

**Best stage of maturity** – The ideal specimens should have flowers in three stages of development starting from the lowest part of the flowering spike (fully open, showing color, and bud)

**Faults** – Faded blooms, soil present on blooms, insect or disease damage apparent, exhibit lacking one or more of the stages of bloom development

**Preparation** – Spikes should be free of insect damage, diseases, and soil

**Exhibit** – Three stems

## **Zinnia** *Zinnia angustifolia*, *Zinnia elegans*, *Zinnia haageana*, *Zinnia tenuifolia*

**Best stage of maturity** – Blooms should be the same size with no yellow florets showing in the center of the bloom

**Faults** – Petals brown or faded, yellow florets emerging from the center

**Preparation** – Find three blooms that are matched in color, size, and stage of maturity; remove soil from stem, foliage, and bloom

**Exhibit** – Three blooms, no buds



## Resources:

Additional information related to growing flowers and houseplants is available from local ISU Extension offices and from the following ISU sources.

### Extension Distribution Center

[www.extension.iastate.edu/store](http://www.extension.iastate.edu/store)  
515-294-5247

### Extension Entomology

[www.ent.iastate.edu](http://www.ent.iastate.edu)  
insects@iastate.edu  
515-294-1101

### Home Horticulture Resource Center

[www.yardandgarden.iastate.edu](http://www.yardandgarden.iastate.edu)  
Check this site for links to horticulture newsletters, events, public gardens, and other news related to gardening in Iowa.

### Hortline

515-294-3108 (Monday-Friday,  
10 a.m.-noon and 1-4:30 p.m.)

### Iowa 4-H

[www.extension.iastate.edu/4H](http://www.extension.iastate.edu/4H)  
515-294-1018

### Plant and Insect Diagnostic Clinic

[www.plantpath.iastate.edu/pdc](http://www.plantpath.iastate.edu/pdc)  
sickplant@iastate.edu  
515-294-0581

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