

Confessions of a Lazy Gardener

Issue #9: The Lazy Gardener Enters the Flower, Food and Foto Show

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I don't know what it is about our FFF (Flower, Food and Foto) Show that is so much fun. But it is a blast. On the face of it, entering Shows would not seem to be a typical Lazy Gardener activity. It requires (1) being prepared a day ahead of time; (2) meticulous attention to details like mud on hostas, insect damage, etc.; (3) getting up at an unbelievable hour of the morning, loading up the car and driving across town in the early dawn hours; and (4) standing on hard concrete floors for a couple hours while situating exhibits for maximum effect.

Maybe one of the reasons it's so fun is that you only have to bring in the good stuff. And the good stuff is probably as good as anyone else's. Nobody needs to know about all those shabby, mildewed, insect-ridden specimens you left in the garden. And it's not all that difficult to arrange horticultural exhibits to display to their advantage once you've tried it a time or two.

So, if you haven't tried entering a show yet, I urge you to give our FFF Show a shot. Here are some things to keep in mind:

Study the show schedule. The show schedule lists the categories of exhibits, and the type and number of specimens in each category. You can find the show schedule on our website. The show schedule lets you plan what you're going to show, and tells you how many of what you're going to need.

Get entry tags and fill them out ahead of time. It's best to use a #2 pencil or some sort of waterproof pen, since there's always a lot of water in the setup area. I use a regular ball-point pen. The FFF Committee chair(s) have tags and will be happy to get some to you.

For cut flowers, cut them the evening before and store them in a cool place. This will allow flowers to "harden", and shows you which ones would have wilted if you'd waited until the morning to pick them. Always cut one or two more than you need to show, so that you can avoid a crisis if a stem gets bent or the blossom gets crushed.

For vegetables, you can either pick them the day before or in the early morning if you have time. (I always pick everything the day before.) There are some rules about stem lengths, whether or not to leave the leaves on or to have the roots trimmed or not that will help you win ribbons. The MSHS *Exhibiting and Judging Handbook* is a very helpful for vegetables. You can find it at <https://northerngardener.org/judging/>

For both vegetables and flowers, uniformity is important. If you're exhibiting three bell peppers, for instance, showing three uniform but slightly smaller peppers is better than showing one really outstanding pepper and two others that can't stand up to the comparison.

And cleanliness is important. I still remember one of our judges writing "grooming" on the back of my tag for a lovely hosta leaf -- that had more than a little dust in the veins when it got into good light. Try to get dirt and dust off leaves and vegetables without removing any natural luster or tone. For instance, excessive cleaning can remove the glaucous blue coating on some hosta leaves. Not ideal.

One of the bigger challenges is moving things to the site. It's important to protect delicate blooms from being crushed or broken. So things like lilies or hosta blooms should be transported in an upright position. Some folks put a piece of chicken wire over the top of a bucket and tuck stems through the chicken wire, which keeps the flowers upright and helps prevent them touching each other. I did something similar with duct tape (my favorite material) in a cross-hatch pattern across the top of a bucket.

But a lot of flowers don't need quite as much care in transport. Margaret Hibberd brings a lot of her flowers in plastic glasses in cardboard drink holders. I have used quart jars spaced carefully within a box. And I depend on at least on well-soaked block of Oasis (floral foam). For many of my smaller things, it's just as easy to stick the stems into Oasis, making sure they're well separated. Works like a charm.

Then you load up your vehicle and drive *carefully* to the show site. I find my biggest challenge is backing out of our driveway: it's a steep hill down to the street, and if I'm going to have things tip over, my driveway is the best place for that to happen. Needless to say, sudden stops and starts on the road are not good, either. Fortunately, you'll be on the road at about 6:30 in the morning, so your cautious driving will not annoy as many people as you'd encounter in rush hour.

When you get there, you can start setting up your exhibits.

For vegetables at FFF, it's pretty straightforward: put them on a plate, arranging them to best demonstrate their uniformity and cultural perfection.

For cut flower exhibits, bottles with water are provided. Remove broken, diseased or insect-damaged leaves, cut stems to the proper length (make stem in proportion to size of bloom), and use styrofoam blocks (provided) or other means to inconspicuously secure the stems in the bottle. Generally, you want the exhibit to present its best possible appearance. There should be no foliage below the water level. No artificial coloring, leaf shine, spray, oiling or wiring is allowed. (It's hard to describe this process on paper, but it isn't all that difficult in practice.)

When your exhibits are ready, attach the entry tags and take them to the display room and place them in the proper location. (Locations are labeled. If you can't find the right spot, ask the show supervisor.) Do not touch or move other exhibits. If there isn't room for your entry, find the show supervisor and ask for assistance. You need to have all your exhibits on the display floor by the time judging is scheduled to begin. Late entries will not be accepted.

Then, wait until the judging is completed and go back and see how you did. I went back through the records for about ten years, and I couldn't find any entrant who failed to get some ribbons. Chances are, you'll be surprised at how well you did!

Let's face it: if a Lazy Gardener can collect a few ribbons at the show, anybody can!