

How to Win Blue Ribbons in the Horticulture Division of a Flower Show

Know your Nomenclature: Carl von Linne or Linnaeus developed the system of Binomial Nomenclature in 1753. Before Linnaeus, names of plants were long, descriptive, and arbitrary. By assigning two names to a plant, *Genus* and *specific epithet*, Linnaeus created order in the plant kingdom.



When your flower show entry form asks for the botanical name of a plant it is looking for the *Genus* and *specific epithet*. The *Genus* and *specific epithet* together are called the *species*. Common names are not as important and are often confusing because they change depending on where you are in the world. *Genus*, *specific epithet*, and, in applicable, cultivar name, are consistent worldwide. When filling out an entry card many exhibitors mistakenly list the Family name. This is not necessary unless specifically asked for on the entry form, something that is rarely done, even in specialist plant society shows. How do you distinguish between a Family name and a *Genus* name? Family names end in “-eae”.

Most of the time, all you need to write is the *Genus*, *specific epithet*, and cultivar name, if there is one (write cv. if you do not know the cultivar name). For more information about this subject including a diagram of how to correctly write a plant name, visit the GCA Website to download the *Botanical Nomenclature* document on the Horticulture or Flower Show Committee pages.

Read the Rules and Class Descriptions

Carefully: Sometimes there is more than one class your exhibit could be entered. Make sure you are entering the right class. Ask the passers if you have any questions. If the class, for example, is for a flowering specimen—don't enter a non-flowering plant or plant that is just about to flower in that class—it won't do well, no matter how nice the foliage is. Read the scale of points associated with each class, if there are any, and make sure your specimen conforms. Read the rules and be sure you have done everything that is required—for instance, pot size, key cards, stem length, and staking—may all be specified in your schedule. The judges have read the rules carefully and you will be marked down if you do not follow them. Hopefully the show's passers will correct any errors on your entry card before it is staged, however it is often



hectic during entries and things get forgotten and passed incorrectly. The ultimate responsibility is on you, the exhibitor.

Scale of Points: Every class in a flower show has a “Scale of Points” which the judges use to determine the winners. Occasionally, when faced with a class of exceptional exhibits that has been subdivided as far as they can go, the judges must point score the exhibits, using the scale of points to determine the blue. Cultural perfection is always the most heavily weighted factor on the scale: a perfectly grown and presented plant, no matter how common, will always do better than a poorly grown rare or mature plant.

- Cultural Perfection: vigorous, healthy appearance including foliage, flowers and/or fruit, and form characteristic of a well-grown plant. There should be no indication of pests or disease (In the cut classes “Condition” and “Grooming” are equivalent to “Cultural Perfection”)
- Distinction: meritorious in aesthetic appeal; noteworthy in size and relationship to container (if a container class)
- Bloom: quality and quantity of bloom, including freshness and substance



- Fruit: quality and abundance of fruit, including color and mass effect
- Maturity: size of plant and foliage characteristic of mature specimen of the species
- Difficulty: challenging to grown or bring to bloom; requiring specialized growing conditions, skill and/or care
- Rarity: seldom grown and exhibited by amateurs

(Definitions adapted from the GCA Flower Show and Judging Guide and the Philadelphia International Flower Show Horticulture Scale of Points)

What makes a great exhibit? An esteemed judge once said that the exhibit should look “perky”. Look at your exhibit. Is it looking its best? Is it a healthy plant? Is it perfectly groomed? Is it floriferous (blooming plant classes)? Does it have an abundance of fruit (fruiting plant classes)? Is the foliage green and healthy (all classes)? Appearance is everything in a flower show and in order to win blues your plant needs to make a good first impression! Though rarity may be part of the scale of points it is usually a very small part. Cultural perfection or condition are always the most important thing for judges and in any scale of points. Dirt, dead leaves, disease and insects do not make a good impression on the judges!

Cut Specimens: Cut your specimen the day before the show, preferably at dawn or dusk, so that the stem can be conditioned. Before cutting, look over the entire plant. Try to cut the specimen with the freshest flowers or foliage—a day too late or too early is not going to win a blue. Never bring a disease or insect-ridden plant to a flower show. What about signs of former insect damage? Good news—most judges are sensitive to the need to grow organically and not spray toxic chemicals on our plants. Minor damage is acceptable, however, if a leaf could have been removed before judging without harming the look of the specimen do it! When you cut your specimen, *always* cut the longest stem, with healthy foliage attached. Judges want to see as much as you are allowed to show—this helps them determine how well grown the plant is that the cut was taken from. Be aware that there are usually stem length restrictions in the cut specimen classes, so choose your specimen wisely and cut it to the right length.



Always cut a stem with foliage if possible (some blooming stems do not have foliage)—this helps the judges see the overall vigor and health of the plant. When you place the stem in the bottle take the time to carefully work the wedging material around the stem so that the specimen is standing up nice and tall.

Container Classes: In the container classes grooming is key! Get out the magnifying glass, grab the tweezers and carefully go over every inch of your plant. Clean the pot, removing any dirt or moss. Some discoloration from fertilizers and salts on clay pots is acceptable but not an incrustation! If you don't want to repot your plant you may rub

some oil on the outside of the clay pot to even out the discoloration. Make sure you have read the rules in the schedule and have the correct size and type pot for the classes you are entering. Some schedules are very specific about pot sizes and types. It would be a shame not to be able to exhibit a beautiful plant because you



didn't read the rules carefully. Don't leave any damaged or dying leaves or flowers on your plant. It is appropriate however, to leave fruiting (seed producing) flower stems. Make sure when removing dying leaves or flowers not to leave any part of the petiole attached to the stem. This is unsightly. Do any major pruning well in advance of the show. Freshen up the soil or top-dress the pot with an appropriate medium such as crushed gravel for succulents or redwood bark for orchids. Whatever you use remember that the top dressing should be unobtrusive and in keeping with the plants cultural requirements (no sphagnum moss around a succulent plant for example). Perlite can be very distracting in potting soil and looks especially bad when it ages and discolors so try to avoid mixes that rely heavily on it or be sure to top dress over it before show time. Don't bury the plant in topdressing: not only does it look bad but it may adversely affect the health of your plant. Decide where the front of your plant is and mark the back of the pot with a chalked "X". Carefully pack your potted plants for transport to the show. Many a plant has met its demise on the way to a show because it was not carefully stabilized for sudden breaks and turns! This can be avoided altogether by taking the time to carefully secure and pack your plants in boxes or crates before departure.

Enter Early: Be considerate of the flower show committee and the judges and make your own life easier! Contact the show chairman before the show to get entry cards



and fill them out at home. **Do not show up with un-groomed and unnamed plants a few minutes before entries close.** This is especially true if you bring multiple entries, which you are encouraged to do. If you come late and unprepared, the passers and chairman will be very busy and probably won't be able to help you and may even turn you, and your plants away—no matter how nice you or your plants are! If you come early, with plants well groomed and entry cards correctly filled out, the passers will have more time to answer your questions and the whole experience will be more pleasant. You will learn more about being a better exhibitor and you *will* win more blue ribbons! And, by becoming a better

exhibitor, you will also become a better gardener, more attuned to *what* you are growing and *how* you are growing it!

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