



Vegetable Exhibits at Fairs and Shows

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For decades friends and neighbors have met to celebrate the end of the harvest by exhibiting their produce at fairs. Today, the county and state fairs continue to play an important role in allowing gardeners of all ages to showcase their skill and ability to grow crops and vegetables. It is important for each exhibitor to present quality vegetable exhibits.

WHAT'S VEGETABLE JUDGING ALL ABOUT?

The main idea behind vegetable displays at county and state fairs is to show skill at growing consistently high quality vegetables. Fair judges play a role while they observe your entries; they adopt the attitude of an owner of a grocery store or vegetable market. When judges see a well-prepared entry with the required number of identical, flawless vegetable specimens, all at the peak of edible maturity, the judge is favorably impressed. Similarly, the market owner feels confident the producer has the knowledge, skills, and resources to continue supplying high quality produce. In this real-world scenario, the prize is a cash sale or a business contract. At the fair exhibitors win ribbons and/or premiums.

WHAT ARE JUDGES LOOKING FOR?

The most important characteristics of any type vegetable exhibit are:

1. **Trueness to type**

Every vegetable type grows into certain shapes, sizes, and colors. For example, a

beefsteak tomato is large, mostly round, and usually red. If paste tomatoes are entered as beefsteak tomatoes in the fair, judges would lower the score because the entry is not true to type.

2. **Good market quality of vegetables**

Some vegetables are eaten before the plant is mature, while others must be mature before the vegetable is at its best edible stage. When the vegetable reaches peak edibility, it is the best stage for fair entry. For example, super-big zucchini are over mature; their seeds are hard and chewy, and the flesh may be bitter. Super-big zucchini are scored lower than zucchini at peak edibility. The zucchini was small enough to be tender but mature enough to have good flavor.

3. **Uniformity in size, shape, color and maturity**

All specimens in a single entry should be as identical as possible. One small and one large cucumber in a single entry show cucumber plants are not producing well.

4. **Without mechanical injury**

Avoid injuring vegetables as they are harvested. Beans with tops cut off are perfectly edible, but they won't win a fair prize.

5. **Freedom of insect or disease injury**
Know the signs of insect and disease damage. Even environmentally-caused defects like cracked or zippered tomatoes will be scored lower than defect-free entries.
6. **All exhibits should be correctly labeled according to variety**
Winning gardeners and smart farmers keep good records of the varieties they plant and grow. If vegetable variety identity cannot be determined, judges might doubt the grower.
7. **Vegetables should be clean**
Never enter vegetables that are caked with dirt. Clean their surfaces gently so tender skin is not damaged. Remember that entries are examples of how a commercial grower would bring their produce to customers.

READ THE FAIR BOOK

Before preparing an exhibit, read the Fair Exhibitor Handbook carefully. Identify the correct lot number for the entry. Enter the correct number of specimens only; judges score lower for extra specimens, and may disqualify entries with too few specimens. Note instructions for preparing certain vegetable entries. For example, the County Fair Exhibitor Handbook has these instructions for preparing carrots: “5 roots at edible maturity, tops ½” long, washed.” If five carrots were entered with their tops left on, the score would be lowered at least one point for failing to follow Fair Handbook instructions.

A sample judging scorecard is shown at the end of this publication.

WHEN AND HOW TO HARVEST VEGETABLES FOR FAIR EXHIBITS

Carry vegetables in single-layer boxes lined with soft rags, crumpled newspaper or other breathable packing material. Stack boxes carefully so the weight of upper boxes is carried by lower boxes; avoid bruising or squashing vegetables in lower boxes.

Harvest at the proper stage of maturity or only slightly early. Proper maturity may be different for different vegetables. Watch for signs like color changes, shiny exteriors, softening, and scents. Get to know when vegetables taste best by trying some when they are too small or too large. Refer to the table in this publication, previous years’ gardening notes or advice from an experienced gardener.

Pick your vegetable entry specimens on the morning of the day they will be entered. Pick before 9 AM when vegetables are still cool from nighttime temperature and plump with water. As the day’s temperature rises, vegetables lose moisture. Even after picking, warm vegetables lose moisture quicker than if cool, and may start to shrivel. Having been cut from the plant, few hot vegetables can regain their plump, firm appearance. If picked during the hot part of the day, plunge the vegetables into cool water immediately after harvest. Leave them in cool water in the shade for about 15 to 45 minutes. This will lower vegetable temperature, slow moisture loss, and help them stay fresher until the next morning when judged.

Always move freshly harvested vegetables into the shade to keep vegetables cool.

Avoid grasping the vegetable when picking. Instead, grab and pinch or snip the stem of the vegetable. Less handling will result in less damage, so vegetables will look better longer.

Clean the vegetables in an appropriate way. For example, carrots may be washed with a gentle stream of water. Clean dirt off onions with a medium-soft bristle brush. Use whatever method will clean the vegetable without damaging the outer covering.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR BEST VEGETABLE DISPLAYS

| Vegetable | Expected shape | Expected size | Expected color | Best edible stage | Common defects to avoid | Best way to clean |
|------------------|----------------------------|------------------|------------------------------|--|--|---|
| Asparagus | Long | 6 - 8" tall | Green, purple | Before leaf brackets at tips begin to open | Insect or mechanical damage | Running water, soft cloth |
| Bean | Flat - rounded Straight | Long | Green, yellow | Firm | Blemishes | Do not wash |
| Beets | Round, oblong | 1 ½- 2" | Red | Fine grain | Cracks or mechanical injury | Soft brush, running water, tops off |
| Broccoli | Compact head | 6 – 12" | Dark green | | Over maturity – yellow flowers | Running water |
| Brussels Sprouts | | 1- 2" | Green | Firm | Remove leaf | Running water |
| Cabbage | Compact head | Size appropriate | Green | Firm, cut before splitting | Insect and disease damage | Running water |
| Cantaloupe | Round | 5" or larger | Tan | | No soft spots, insect or mechanical damage | Running water, soft cloth |
| Carrots | Straight, elongated | Medium | Deep colored | Firm, fine grain, smooth | Cracks, insect or mechanical injury | Running water, soft cloth, leafy tops off |
| Cauliflower | Compact head | 6 – 12" | White, creamy white | Firm, smooth | No discoloration, remove outer leaves | Running water |
| Collards | Leafy | Size appropriate | | | Insect damage, tough and fibrous | Running water |
| Sweet Corn | Plump and milky | Bright | Silks dark, begin to shrivel | Well formed, cleanly husked | Insect and disease injury | Running water |
| Cucumbers | Straight | 6 - 10" | Dark green, white spine | Smooth | Yellowing | Running water |
| Eggplant | Rounded, elongated | Medium | Purple, white | Half grown before color dulls | Injury or blemish | Running water |
| Lettuce | Leafy | Size appropriate | White, green | Heads – firm, trimmed | | Running water |

| | | | | | | |
|--------------|--------------------------|-------------------------|--|----------------------------|---|--|
| Mustard | Leafy | Size appropriate | Green | | | Running water |
| Onion | Round | Medium - Large | White, red, yellow, purple | Dry, scales intact | Doubles, misshapen, sunburned bulbs, insect, disease or mechanical damage | Soft brush |
| Parsnips | | Medium | White, green | Fresh, smooth | | Running water, leafy tops off |
| Snap Peas | Rounded, flattened | | Green | Crisp, firm | Filled pods, insect, disease or mechanical damage | Running water |
| Peppers | Rounded, elongated | Size appropriate | Green, red, yellow | Firm, fresh | Insect, disease or mechanical damage | Running water, soft cloth |
| Potatoes | Rounded | Medium | Brown, purple | | Cuts, bruises, knobs, second growth | Soft brush, running water |
| Pumpkins | Round, oblong | Medium | Orange, white | Hard rind, heavy | Insect, disease or mechanical damage | Running water, soft cloth, stems remain |
| Radishes | Rounded | Medium | Red, white | Firm, crisp, smooth | Softness or spongy texture | Running water, trim leafy top |
| Squash | Elongated, rounded | Medium | Yellow, white | Rind hard, mature | Cracks, splits | Do not wash |
| Swiss Chard | Roots attached | Leaves 12" plus | Green with white or red rib | | | Running water |
| Tomatoes | Round to flattened round | 2 ½" or larger diameter | Red, pink, orange, yellow, white, purple | Fully mature, firm, smooth | Cracks, cat face, insect, disease, mechanical damage | Running water, soft cloth, Green – tops on, Other – tops off |
| Turnip Roots | Round | Medium | Purple, white | Fresh, firm | | Running water, leafy tops off |
| Watermelon | Round, oblong | Commercial | Green | Firm, ripe | Insect or mechanical damage | Running water, soft cloth, 1" stem remain |

A TYPICAL FAIR JUDGING SHEET FOR VEGETABLE ENTRIES

The following table shows a typical judging sheet with possible scores for vegetable entries. Most entries for home gardeners and 4-H'ers are on plates; larger growers and FFA clubs may enter trays, packs, or large sacks full of vegetable specimens.

| | POSSIBLE POINTS | |
|---------------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| | PLATES | TRAYS AND PACKS |
| SIZE | 15 | 15 |
| SHAPE | 15 | 15 |
| COLOR | 20 | 20 |
| UNIFORMITY | 20 | 20 |
| FREEDOM FROM INJURY | 30 | 20 |
| PACKING | - | 10 |
| TOTAL | 100 | 100 |

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