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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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