



Guidelines for Exhibiting Vegetables at Fairs

A vegetable garden provides you with fresh produce and an opportunity to learn more about plant science. It can also give you much pride and satisfaction. Exhibiting vegetables at a fair or show gives you a chance to display the results of your efforts. In addition, it can give you the thrill of competing with others and learning about high-quality vegetables and the best practices related to their growth and care. Regardless of the ribbons you receive or the prize money you win, you will greatly profit from your experience at the fair. As an exhibitor, you can become a better vegetable grower and a well-informed consumer; you will also learn the importance of good sportsmanship. To produce prize-winning vegetables, you need to do the following:

- Learn about planting and caring for a vegetable garden.
- Plan to have vegetables available at the right time and in sufficient quantities so you can prepare a good exhibit at fair time.
- Know the fair rules and regulations and determine what types of vegetables can be exhibited.
- Recognize the desirable qualities that the judges look for.
- Become acquainted with the methods of preparing different vegetables for showing at the fair.
- Learn the best methods for transporting vegetables to avoid damaging them.

Growing the Vegetables

If you are an avid gardener, you will enjoy growing vegetables. Naturally, you should strive for the highest quality produce possible. You should pay special attention to planting dates, the selection of varieties, planting techniques, care during the growing season, controlling pests (such as insects, weeds, and diseases), and harvesting the crops at the proper times.

One important factor in growing quality vegetables is the selection of superior varieties. In this regard, you have many options. Selecting F1 hybrids and disease-resistant cultivars can be a very good option; by choosing wisely, you avoid many disease problems in the garden. For many gardens, hybrid cultivars can have more vigor, better quality and yield, and greater disease resistance than many of the older non-hybrid types. Alternatively, you may consider Heirloom varieties which are generally less hybridized and can open up a whole world of diverse options in terms of color, flavor, shape, and growing requirements. Although neither F1 hybrids nor Heirloom varieties will be perfect for every garden situation, making the right variety selection will help you avoid issues further down the road.

In addition to having the vegetables at the right stage of maturity for showing, you also need to plant enough of each kind so you can pick and choose from sufficient produce to prepare a top-notch exhibit. For example, you will have a much better chance of a prize-winning entry if you grow ten tomato plants rather than only four.

Planning for Quality and Quantity

Having enough vegetables for exhibition requires careful attention to the time of planting because this factor determines the time of harvest. Vegetables that are immature or overripe are of little value at showtime. To determine the proper planting date, first check the seed catalog or seed packet for the approximate number of days required from planting to harvesting. Then, count back that number of days on the calendar, starting from the opening date of the fair. Mark down this date as the proper time of planting. However, remember that you will probably need to make an additional planting or two (perhaps one earlier and another a bit later), to allow for variations in weather that can aid or hinder plant growth. How early you plant depends on the hardiness of the vegetable, the days to maturity for the variety, and the climate in your area.



Rules for Exhibitors

Before planning your exhibits, obtain a copy of the fair rules and read them carefully. Pay special attention to the time for submitting entries, the number of entries allowed, the quantities of vegetables needed, and to any other rules concerning the preparation of exhibits. Although many fairs and shows operate comparably, there are always some variations. Fair rules also change from year to year, so never assume that last year's rules apply to this year's event.

Vegetables are usually exhibited on plates, in an individual/group display, or as a market basket. The numbers of the specimens of each vegetable usually required for a plate are listed below. In a group display, the number of specimens for a particular vegetable should be the same as the number required for a plate exhibit. Again, check with the fair you are exhibiting in for specific rules.

One specimen

- Broccoli (head)
- Cabbage (head)
- Cauliflower
- Chinese cabbage (head)
- Eggplant
- Greens (collard, endive, escarole, kale, mustard, Swiss chard) (1 plant)
- Horseradish (root)
- Lettuce (1 head or plant)
- Muskmelon
- Pumpkin
- Squash, winter
- Watermelon

Three specimens

- Leek

Five specimens

- Asparagus (spears)
- Beet
- Carrot
- Corn, sweet
- Cucumber, pickling or slicing
- Garlic
- Kohlrabi
- Onion, dry
- Parsnip
- Pepper, large-fruited
- Popcorn (ears)
- Potato
- Rhubarb (stalks)
- Squash, summer
- Tomato, slicing
- Turnip



Twelve specimens

- Bean, green (pods)
- Bean, lima (pods)
- Bean, wax (pods)
- Herbs (stems or branches)
- Okra
- Onion, green
- Pea (pods)
- Pepper, small-fruited (chili, cherry, etc.)
- Tomato, small-fruited (including paste types)

What Makes a Good Vegetable Exhibit?

When selecting vegetables for exhibition, keep in mind that the judge will evaluate them based on cleanliness, uniformity, condition, quality, and trueness to variety.

Cleanliness. Only enter vegetables that are clean and bright in appearance. Dirty vegetables create an unfavorable impression and indicate that the exhibitor was not interested in preparing an attractive, first-rate display. Sometimes you can clean vegetables by washing them, while in other cases, wiping them with a soft, clean cloth, or brushing them lightly with a soft brush is sufficient. Further instructions for cleaning specific kinds of vegetables are given below.

Uniformity. The word “uniformity” as used in connection with vegetables in competition means that each specimen on a plate or each vegetable within a display is of similar size, color, stage of maturity, shape, and condition. Judges place considerable importance on the uniformity of vegetables exhibited. The larger the supply of vegetables, the better chance you have to choose specimens that are uniform in every respect.

Condition. Condition indicates how the crop was grown, harvested, and handled. Vegetables should be free of dirt, cuts, bruises, and defects, as well as insect or disease damage.

Quality. This term refers to the prime eating condition of any vegetable but also indicates the best color development, shape, texture, and size. Many exhibitors seem to think that a winning vegetable entry should have huge or even gigantic specimens. Although large size is important in a few classes (i.e. heaviest cabbage, largest pumpkin, or biggest watermelon), considerably less emphasis is placed on large size in most vegetable classes. In deciding on the size of the vegetables to exhibit at the fair, think in terms of the sizes most in demand by consumers at the supermarkets. They generally prefer average-sized specimens over extremely large or quite small ones. Select vegetables that have a deep, clear, intense color. Avoid dull-colored specimens or those that are deep-colored due to over-ripeness. Experience will help you determine the best time to harvest a particular vegetable.

Trueness to variety. Each vegetable variety has its special characteristics. Therefore, an exhibit should consist entirely of vegetables of the same variety. For example, a plate of four ‘Better Boy’ tomatoes and one ‘Jubilee’ tomato (an orange-fruited variety) would certainly make up a plate of fine tomatoes, but it would not be true to variety.



Transporting Vegetables to the Fair

Vegetable specimens that may be damaged while being transported should be individually wrapped in tissue paper or newspaper. Place the wrapped specimens in strong containers, such as bushel baskets, boxes, or a cooler, using a large amount of crumpled paper between layers. Also, take along extra specimens for each exhibit, in case something happens to one or more of those chosen for entry into your exhibition.

Desirable Characteristics

In addition to being uniform in size, shape, color, and stage of maturity, the vegetables should have certain other characteristics common for the type. The following suggestions may help you select vegetables for an exhibit or competition. These are only general recommendations and should supplement the exact rules established for your specific fair show.

Asparagus

- Straight, dark green spears with tight scales.
- Free of rust disease, insect injury, or other blemishes.
- Spears trimmed to 7 or 8 inches.
- Display in a shallow pan of water to prevent wilting.

Bean, Lima

- Pod well-filled, bright green, tender, and fresh.
- Trim stems to ½-inch.
- Clean by wiping with a soft, dry cloth; do not wash.

Bean, Snap

- Pods tender, stringless, and brittle, with seeds in the immature stage.
- Free of dirt, rust, blemishes, or other imperfections.
- Trim stems to ¼-inch.
- Clean by wiping with a soft, dry cloth or by washing if necessary.

Beet

- Smooth, free of side roots and blemishes.
- Medium to small sizes preferred (1-½ to 2 inches in diameter).
- Flesh, when cut, should be firm, crisp, and fine-grained.
- Can be displayed with top leaves, or cut down to ½ to 1 inch; tap root should be left on.
- Clean by soaking and washing.

Broccoli

- Stalk and head at least 6 inches long, firm, tender, crisp, and with good color.
- Buds tightly closed.
- Center head at least 3 inches in diameter.
- Leaves removed below the head.
- Clean by dipping in cold water.



Brussels Sprouts

- Not less than 1-inch diameter.
- Round, fresh, firm.
- Bases trimmed smoothly.

Cabbage

- Head solid and heavy for size.
- Free of blemishes and insect damage.
- Stem evenly trimmed at the base.
- One to two outer wrapper leaves should be left on.
- Clean by washing in water or wiping with a dry or moist cloth.
- Red cabbage should be handled carefully to preserve the 'bloom' as much as possible.

Carrot

- Specimens straight with deep orange, smooth skin.
- Free of cracks, greening, or side roots.
- Tops trimmed to ½ to 1 inch; trim as close to show as possible to prevent drying out.
- Do not remove the tap root.
- Length: short varieties, 2-¼ to 2-½ inches; half-long varieties, 5 to 7 inches long; long varieties, 7 ½ inches or more.
- Clean by washing; do not scrub. Use a soft brush to remove dirt around the top and increase.

Cauliflower

- Heads are pure white, solid, and uniform, with 4 to 6 protective leaves attached.
- Protective leaves trimmed to 1 inch to expose curd.
- Curd should be compact, deep, firm, and at least 4 inches in diameter.
- Stem cut off ¼-inch below bottom leaf.
- Clean by wiping with a dry cloth or washing if necessary.

Corn, Sweet

- Ears are fresh and well-filled from tips to base ends.
- Kernels are plump, soft, tender, and arranged in closely spaced rows.
- Remove "flag" leaves but do not remove husks.
- Clean by wiping with a dry cloth.
- Trim base evenly.

Cucumber

- Straight, deep green, with blunt ends.
- Trim stem ¼- to ½-inch deep.
- Slicing cucumbers: 6 to 9 inches long and not over 2-½ inches in diameter; pickling cucumbers: not more than 3-½ inches long and 1-¼ inches in diameter.
- Do not wax.
- Clean by wiping with a soft, dry, or moist cloth if necessary.



Eggplant

- Specimens are firm and shiny, with uniform, deep color.
- Small blossom scar and a fresh green calyx
- Trim the stem to 1 inch.
- Clean by wiping with a soft, dry, or moist cloth.

Garlic

- Medium-sized bulbs with small, well-dried necks.
- Necks trimmed to 1 inch.
- The outer skin should be intact.
- Roots trimmed to ½-inch close to the bulb.

Herbs

- Leaves fresh and tender; free of blemishes.
- Trim stems evenly.
- Clean by washing, if necessary.

Kohlrabi

- Specimens 2 to 3 inches in diameter, and tender with good color.
- Leave 4 to 6 crown leaves, trimmed to ½-inch.
- Cut off the tap root ½-inch below the enlarged stem.
- Clean by brushing or wiping with a dry cloth.

Leek

- Specimens should be long and straight with white stems.
- The longer the white stem the better.
- The base should be even and not swollen.
- Trim the end of the tops in an arrow shape.
- Cut roots to ¼-inch.

Muskmelon

- Evenly netted and free of decay spots, defects, or cracks.
- Smooth stem scar, indicating harvest at the “full-slip” stage.
- Clean by brushing or wiping when the soil is dry.

Okra

- Small pods, fresh, bright green, and not over 3 inches long.
- Leave ½- inch of stem.
- Clean by wiping with a dry or moist cloth or by brushing.



Onion

- Firm, mature, well-shaped bulbs, at least 2 inches in diameter.
- Avoid double and split bulbs, and those with soft necks.
- Remove loose or discolored skins; do not peel completely; if the bulb appears shiny, you have peeled too far.
- Trim the top to 1 inch; trim roots to ¼-inch.
- Clean by washing carefully or by brushing specimens while dry.

Onion, Green

- Good specimens have long, white stems ½- an inch or less in diameter.
- The bulb should be only slightly larger than the stems.
- Trim the tips evenly; trim the roots to ¼ inch.

Parsnip

- Roots solid, smooth, well-shaped, and 2 to 2½ inches in diameter.
- Tapered evenly with no side roots.
- Skin a light, creamy yellow color.
- Tops trimmed to 1 inch; leave taproot on.
- Clean by soaking in water to remove dirt; do not scrub.

Peas

- The pods should be green and fresh; do not exhibit dry or shriveled pods.
- Handling the pods more than necessary will remove the bloom (the natural waxy coating).
- Trim the stem to ¼-inch.
- Shell peas should be well-filled; snow-type peas should be flat.

Pepper, Bell

- Specimens firm, thick-fleshed, and deep in color.
- Specimens should all be immature or mature but not mixed.
- All should have the same number of lobes.
- Trim stems to ¼ to ½-inch.
- Clean by wiping with a soft, dry cloth or washing if necessary.

Pepper (other than bell types)

- Specimens with length, shape, and color typical for the variety.
- Trim stems to ½ to ¾-inch.
- Clean by wiping with a soft, dry cloth.

Potato

- Specimens fully mature, clean, and free of insect or disease damage, injury cracks, sunburn, scab, or greening.
- Clean by brushing lightly or washing to remove soil after tubers are dry. Do not scrub.
- Do not mix varieties.



Pumpkin

- Deep, even color, thick-fleshed, and heavy in weight for the size of the specimen.
- Free of blemishes and dirt.
- Trim the stem to 2 inches.
- Clean by wiping and polishing with a dry cloth or by washing if necessary.

Rhubarb

- Stalks at least 10 inches long and at least 1 inch across at the middle of the stalk.
- Skin smooth and well-colored.
- Trim leaves to 1 or 2 inches in an arrowhead shape.
- Base should remain intact; pull stems from the plant so the base is attached.
- Clean by wiping with a dry cloth or by washing, if necessary.

Rutabaga

- 3-½ to 5-inch diameter
- Trim tops ¼ to ½-inch.
- Trim taproot ½ inch.

Shallots

- Bulbs well-ripened with thin necks.
- Remove loose skins and roots.
- Round with no signs of doubling.
- Braid tops together or trim to 2 inches.

Squash, Summer

- Soft rind (immature) and at prime eating stage.
- Avoid over-mature, bruised, or misshapen specimens.
- Leave 1 inch of evenly trimmed stem attached.
- Clean by wiping with a soft, dry cloth or by washing, if necessary.

Squash, Baby Summer (flower attached)

- Select fruits of similar size – usually 3 inches or less.
- Handle carefully as they are easily bruised.
- Flowers fresh, intact, and attached to fruit.

Squash, Winter

- The outer rind hard and firm.
- Avoid immature, cracked, or split specimens.
- Leave 1 inch of stem attached.
- Clean by brushing or wiping with a soft, dry cloth, or by washing, if necessary.



Tomato

- Firm and free of cracks, blossom-end rot, insect, disease, or mechanical damage.
- Ripe tomatoes should be in prime condition for slicing; avoid overripe fruit.
- Green tomatoes should be entirely green on the same plate.
- Do not exhibit red and green tomatoes on the same plate.
- Display with or without stems.
- Clean by wiping with a moist cloth.

Turnip

- Roots at least 1-½ to 2-½ inches in diameter.
- Trim tops to 1 inch; leave taproot 2 to 3 inches long.
- Clean by washing.

Watermelon

- Typical of variety in shape and color.
- Mature but not overripe; should have a bright or velvety appearance.
- Ground spot should be yellowish in color and not white or pale green.
- Leave stem 1 inch long.
- Clean by wiping with a moist cloth or by washing, if necessary.

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