

Guidance for collecting cut specimens for the horticulture bench show.

Plan in advance!

Go out to your garden days in advance of the next bench show and see what may be in bloom. Make a note to yourself of what would work for the classes in the show's schedule. Now you'll remember which flowers you might be able to use when the time to collect specimens comes, because you planned in advance.

The right time to cut.

Collect your specimens either soon after sunrise, or late in the day, as the sun is setting. Never cut in the middle of the day, when the flowers are not fully hydrated and may not have time to recover.

Bring a container

Be sure to bring a water filled container when you go out to collect your specimens. Be sure it is clean. A plastic container would be a better idea than bringing your favorite vase that could get broken out in the garden.

Search for the most perfect specimens!

You are looking for specimens that are at or close to their peak point of bloom. If the plant is one with many buds along its stem, you should see color on the buds and at least a few buds should be opening. Some flowers, if cut before they are fully opened, may not open once cut. You need to learn the behavior of your flowers, as they don't all behave the same!

Use the right tool!

Always be sure to use a clean and sharp cutting tool when cutting your specimens. Never use an ordinary scissor! A scissor is for cutting paper or fabric, but not for flower stems! A scissor will crush the vessels that are needed for water uptake.

When ready to cut

Try to cut as long a stem length as you can. You will cut it again when conditioning. Cut at about a 45 degree angle. This provides the greatest surface area, allowing for maximum water uptake. Also, if cut straight across, the flat stem bottom could sit against the vase bottom and cut off water absorption!

Get it into the water right away!

As soon as you've cut the stem, put it into your container of water. Stems left out of water, even for a short time, will begin to seal up and you don't want that to happen!

Strip off the lower leaves

If you want you can start to strip off the foliage on the lower end of the stem now. You will fine tune this when you get inside and begin to condition your specimens. You must be sure no foliage that will fall beneath the water level remains on any stem. Foliage left beneath the water level will contribute to bacterial growth in the water and will shorten the vase life!

Regarding Daffodils

The mucilage from their stems contain alkaloids which will be toxic to most other flower stems sharing the same water. It is especially toxic to Roses and Tulips. Iris is an exception! A Daffodil placed in the water with an Iris seems to make the Iris last longer! You may want to experiment and check this out.

Read what the class calls for very carefully!

Be sure to read the wording of the schedule very carefully! Is it calling for just a single stem? Is it calling for a bouquet or a collection? If it's asking for a collection, you may be able to have a collection of all Roses, but they usually must be all of a different variety or cultivar, not all the same Rose. Or maybe you may be able to have a collection of totally different types of flowers, if the schedule reads that the collection can be using any type of plant; annual, perennial, biennial, or bulbs. You can not enter specimens from a plant you just went out and purchased. You must have been growing it for six months or from something you've been growing from early in the season. Is there a restriction on the length of the stem or branch? Be sure to measure and trim accordingly, if this is so.

Conditioning

'Conditioning' is a very important step not to be skipped in preparing your entries, if at all possible. If you take the time to condition your specimens, it will surely give your entries staying power to keep them standing tall, and looking fresh and vibrant for the entire length of the show, (which in a real flower show will be for days!)

Containers for conditioning.

In advance of going out to collect your specimens, you should have the containers you'll put your specimens into for conditioning already waiting at the sink. This is so you can get your specimens into them as soon as possible, once you come in, without any waste of precious time.

How to condition

Once you bring your collected specimens inside, run the tap water to get it warm and fill up a container with warm water. Remove any leaves on the lower part of the stem that may end up beneath the water. Now you must cut your specimen again, using a clean and sharp cutting tool, at about a 45 degree angle. You can cut it under running water or beneath the warm water in the container, this may help prevent any air bubbles from entering into the stem and block water uptake. Continue to do this with each of your specimens. If you can, you can give each it's own container, or a few may share the same container, as long as they are not sharing with Daffodils! and are not crowded together. Once you are finished and all are in conditioning containers, move them all to a cool, dark and still location to rest for the night.

Some flowers prefer cool water

In general, most flowers will do well conditioning in warm water. The warmth of the water relaxes and opens up the vessels, just as we would relax in a tub of warm water! But not all flowers are the same. Flowers that grow from bulbs seem to prefer cool water to warm, so with your Tulips, Daffodils, Iris and Hyacinths it may be better to use cool water. Remember to take care and not mix Daffodils with other flowers, except for the Iris, who's bloom is actually extended by the toxin that comes from the Daffodil.

Extending the vase life

Besides remembering to condition your specimens, some people add floral preservatives to the water. These are said to extend the vase life by acidifying the water, cutting down on bacterial growth, and feeding the flower. To be honest, I haven't done this with my entries, so you can experiment and see if it helps. You can use store bought floral preservatives or some people make their own using very small amts of bleach, as well as white vinegar, and white sugar. The amount of sugar used can vary by a lot depending on the flower. Some flowers like more sugar, some like less and some are better off with no sugar. Daffodils, Tulips and Gerbera Daisy are best with no sugar. Again, I have not used any preservatives, so if you do, you can share your experience with me. You can Google for different recipes. Once flowers are conditioned, they will last longer if not placed in warm areas or in direct sunlight, but do be sure to have them where you can see and enjoy their beauty!!

Refrigeration

Florists may keep flowers in the refrigerator, but that refrigerator is just having flowers in it. Take care if you think of putting your flowers in your refrigerator though, as fruits and vegetables stored in your refrigerator give off ethylene gas and this gas can be detrimental to your flowers! The biggest ethylene producers are apples, bananas, pears and apricots. The easy way to remember which fruits are ethylene producers is that they are climacteric fruits; all of those fruits ripen after they are picked. Keep your flowers away from them!

Choosing your vase for your entry

Try to use a vase that is in proportion to the size and shape of your specimens as much as possible. Usually the schedule calls for the vase to be a clear glass container. In any case, make sure it is sparkling clean, so as not to allow contaminants into the water. If you don't have vases, any clear glass bottle or jar from soda, juice, jam etc will be fine as long as it is clean and clear!

Grooming

Grooming is what we do with ourselves when we are going out for a special occasion. Think of this as your flower's very special occasion and they have to shine and be noticed and look as good as they possibly can! So we are going to look them over with great scrutiny. You can gently wipe the leaves with a special soft brush like the type one would use for applying makeup or a soft piece of fabric you might use for dusting. This would not be done on a plant where this would result in marks on the leaves, (one that comes to mind is the Iris). Check for any cobwebs or insects that could be hiding on the undersides of leaves. Remove any dead, damaged, diseased or undesirable growth. If there is an overabundance of leaves that are obscuring the flowers, you may want to very carefully and discreetly remove some, to draw the attention to the flowers.

The entry card

Do try to fill out the entry card the night before if possible. This way you won't have to worry about doing it when you're short on time in the morning. If you are unable to download an entry card, I will have cards you can fill out, when you arrive early! Try to have both the proper Latin name of your specimens, as well as any common name it may have, if it has any common names. Latin names are important to assure that no matter where you go in the world, you are referring to the same plant, as it's Latin name is universally known. Be sure you have the correct spelling. Did you propagate this plant yourself? If so, an explanation of how you did it will gain you extra credit during judging. Be sure to say whether you grew it from a seed, or a cutting, or layering and any details on growing conditions etc. If there's not enough room on the card, you can include that info on an additional index card. This will be of interest to fellow members who may want to try to propagate a plant like yours. Most importantly, don't forget to

put your name on your entry before you fold down the bottom of your card!! Just so you know, if you've never received a First Place award at a real GCA flower show, then you are considered to be a 'Novice' and this can give you extra consideration for having less growing experience!

Save your entry cards!

This is a bit of advice from my own experience. There are many good reasons to save your entry cards in an envelope. First, you often can learn from the judge's comments, as to what you did well with your entry, and how to do better the next time. This is very useful information! Then, in the next year and future years, you can refer back to your cards to see what plants in your garden were in bloom this month in past years and you can then check to see if that plant is in bloom and a possible candidate for entry into the show this year. You'll already have the correct spelling of it's names right there on that old card! Maybe it was part of a collection and you can check what else was in that entry that year in the same month. So this is a big time saver. You can also keep track of how many years it's been growing in your garden.

Transport to the show

A large part of your success hinges on getting your precious but fragile flowers to the show without them suffering damage enroute. You may have some mishaps along the way, but you'll learn from these mistakes! My best advice is to do as much as you can the night before. You should already have your plan worked out and ready. If you don't own a specially designed carrier made for this, that's not a problem. I substituted various things. You need to find some type of box that isn't too heavy to carry, is the right size and height. Make sure to figure out how you plan to keep the specimens in their containers snug in their position, as you may have to stop short, go up or down a hill, or over a bump in the road. I often used small hand towels placed around the bottom of the containers in the box. You could also use bubble wrap or crumpled up paper. Empty some of the water from the containers, before you set off so that if you stop short or go over a bump, the water won't splash up and get the flowers all wet. Leave plenty of extra time to get you and your entries safely to the show on time! It would be such a shame, if after all your great effort, you arrive too late to enter your specimens, because the judging has already begun. Please don't let that happen!!

Bringing extra specimens, Just in case

Sometimes you may have more than one specimen that would work for the class. You may wish to bring the backup along, just in case something gets damaged on the way. Or sometimes you may not be able to decide which specimen you want to enter. Usually you can only have one entry in each class. So you may have to make a hard decision and sometimes you'll choose correctly and sometimes not. You can ask the judge later, if you would have done better to enter your alternate specimen and why. If there are four

classes, you can make four entries, if they meet the specifications called for in each of the classes.

Start time.

We must be firm on the start time of the judging, if not, it throws the meeting off it's schedule. So please, do your best to arrive early if you are planning to bring entries for the bench show. All entries must be in place, on the table, with their entry cards filled out by 9 am! You have to count on morning traffic and you will be driving slower now with your fragile specimens on board. Then, you have to unload and park, so leave plenty of time!

Placement on the table

Place your entry on the table with it's best side facing forward. We all have a best side, so does your specimen! Something to consider the night before, if your flower needs a bit of propping up, or 'wedging', you can bring some Saran wrap to twist around it's stem to keep it's face looking forward and directly up at the judge and all else who will come to admire it.

You will learn something each time!

Enter as often as you can, as each time you enter a show, you will come away with knowledge. You will learn what you did that was good, as well as what you could do to improve next time around. So try not to miss an opportunity to gain more experience, so that when you enter a real flower show, you'll be more knowledgeable and so much better prepared.

If you have any questions, please contact Paula E.