

PLANT GROOMING TIPS

FOR EXHIBITION IN A FLOWER SHOW

It is great fun to exhibit in a flower show. It is thrilling to be given an award that recognizes your skill and passion for growing. There is considerable support available to you for entering shows from the members of the Garden Club of Darien and also from The Garden Club of America. Those of us on the horticulture committee will gladly assist you to choose a class, plan, grow and enter. Just ask! We will even make house calls. I encourage all of you to enter, and to enter often. Think of your experiences entering shows as a time to learn, cultivate new friends (while cultivating your entries), and to have fun!

A common mistake made by beginning exhibitors is neglecting to groom their entry or doing it in a haphazard manner. Grooming is critical and is taken into consideration by the judging panel. A poorly groomed entry will be dropped in award ranking. In a flower show class with spectacular entries, all other things being equal, grooming can be the deciding factor in the award of first and second place.

These are quick tips to guide you to **visually** prepare your entry for exhibition. This emphasizes plants grown in containers - cut specimens will be addressed at a later time. This is a general discussion only, specific recommendations may be applicable for certain plants.

The Schedule

1. Download the current GCA's *Flower Show and Judging Guide Yellow Book*: <https://www.gcamerica.org/members/yellow-book>. It is updated every July. The Yellow Book will detail judging criteria for all types of plants/competitions for you to reference as needed.
2. Read the schedule for the competition you are entering. Pay attention to the requirements for your entry. During in-club shows, where we do not 'pass' entries, adherence to the rules is taken into consideration in the judging. GCA show entries that do not conform to the schedule **and are not properly groomed** will not be 'passed' for entry.

The Pot

1. Again, the schedule will detail the container requirements for your entry. Clay pots are the most universally accepted. Always accompany your entry with a matching saucer of the appropriate size to your pot. In a par class you can use a decorative pot as long as it has a matching saucer. Your pot should also be in proportion to the size of your plant. Use the 2/3 plant-1/3 container rule where possible. A plant too large or too small for the container is a distraction to the presentation.
2. You are usually allowed to nest a plastic pot inside another pot as long as you can't see the inner pot. This is sometimes preferable to repotting, especially with plants such as Rabbit Hair Ferns that do not like to be disturbed. You can trim the plastic and top dress according to the schedule to disguise it.
3. Your pot should be as spotless as possible. Watermarks (salt buildup), dirt, other residue should be removed. If the pot is very dirty and you have time to repot it (one to two weeks before you

enter a show) you might consider doing so. It can be tricky to clean a pot with a plant inside. Rinse off the pot in your kitchen sink using a sprayer, making sure the water is at room temperature. It is usually best not to get water on the plant. Gently clean the pot with a brush with medium hard bristles or steel wool (not on a ceramic pot) being careful not to disturb the plant. Clean the entire surface and pot rim without disturbing the soil. It is a good idea to lightly scrub the bottom of the pot. Rinse the pot and examine it for dirt spots and stains. Most of the loose dirt should have been removed. If necessary brush the pot again. A paste made of baking soda and water applied to the pot might be a good alternate first step, brushing as necessary, and then rinsing.

Some remaining stains may not show up until the pot is dry. You might use fine or medium fine sandpaper to 'scrub' the pot. A dry pot is better than a wet one since the sandpaper loses its effectiveness when wet. Once you are satisfied, dry the pot to see if stains remain. If stains remain use a light vegetable oil or WD-40 to temporarily cover them. With a folded paper towel or sponge wet the entire outside surface of the pot with oil. Wipe off the excess oil and dry it with a paper towel or rag.

The Plant

1. Center your plant in the pot (some exceptions include bonsai). If you need to repot it, do it one to two weeks before the competition so that it can adjust. During growing turn the pot frequently to promote symmetry.
2. Clean both sides of the leaves and stem using a damp, soft rag or a Q-tip. Never use a damp cloth for any plant with hairy leaves such as an African violet. Instead use a soft brush such as a paintbrush.
3. Be sure it is bug free including the soil. You may need to use an organic horticultural spray.
4. Do not apply oil or leaf shine. Your plant will be disqualified.
5. If there are flowers, gently brush off any debris or pollen with a Q-tip.
6. Remove any damaged leaves. If removing all the damage will make the plant look naked, consider finding another plant to enter. If it has brown tips, cut the damaged area to a shape that matches other leaves. Use egg white on cutting edges to keep tips from turning brown.
7. Use charcoal, eyebrow pencil, permanent markers, etc. to disguise any imperfections in either the stem or leaves from pruning. You can use matching markers to disguise small spots on leaves as well.
8. Scrape top of soil off, taking care not to hurt the roots. Be sure all perlite and other debris is removed. You can place new soil on top. Alternatively, based on schedule, you can top dress with worm casings or very clean soil. Just be sure the soil is still below the rim of the container.
9. Do not obscure stems on the surface with soil. Judges will assume it is two plants and disqualify it.

Transportation

1. Be very careful transporting your plant. Be sure it is thoroughly watered. Water the night before the show so the pot and saucer have a chance to dry out. Find a low box wide enough that the foliage does not hang over the sides. Place your plant in the center of the box. Stuff tissue paper or plastic bags tightly around the sides of container, without touching the foliage, so that the plant cannot shift. Wrap your saucer and place it in the box so that you don't forget it. Sometimes I will have more than one plant to enter. If there is sufficient space, I will place them in the same box, taking care that the container and foliage never touch.
2. Enclose your completed key card in a plastic bag to prevent any dirt or water damage. If I have multiple entries in a show I will put all of my key cards together and carry them along with all of my grooming tools together in a bag. If I have only one entry I carry the key card in the same box. Sometimes I enter for other members and I keep their card separate with their entry.
3. Carefully place your box on the floor of your car or in the back if you have an SUV, not on a seat. Place bean bags or bricks around the box so it can't shift during transport.
4. Unpack carefully, checking once again for any last minute grooming issues. The passers will be helpful and give you advice on further grooming if needed.
5. After you pass your entry, be sure to keep your box and packing. You will need it for the trip home.

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