

Preparing Irises for Exhibition at Iris Shows

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(Editor's Note: The late Sheldon Butt was well known for his show exhibitions. These words of wisdom should help others.)

The first step in preparing your irises for successful entry in an iris show is to cut the stalks before the buds open. Why cut them in bud instead of waiting until the flowers open?

This practice avoids potential damage to the blooms from rain, wind or hail. It also avoids possible sun fading of blooms, particularly a problem in strong sunlight in the case of the darker colored irises. Note that the Judges' Handbook allocates 15 points (out of 100 total) to "color." Color saturation (which suffers in sun fading) enters into scoring in this area.

Cutting ahead of time allows you to increase the number of irises from which to select your entries by letting you slow down opening of blooms from plants which otherwise would have bloomed and folded before the show or to speed up blooming by forcing flowers which otherwise would not have been ready in time for the show.

Of course, when you cut your irises in the bud, you won't know whether or not they will have faults, such as splits, deformed petals, etc., when they do open. Also, in spite of your best efforts, the buds may open too soon or, they may not open in time. Thus, it makes sense to cut two or three stalks of each variety as insurance against these problems.

The best time to cut the stalks is early in the morning. Next best is late evening. Why? As the buds mature and flowers open water and nutrients continue to be transported up through the stalk. When you cut the stalk, the 'driving force' to carry water up to the buds through the stalk is reduced. It is important that there be as much water and nutrients in the stalk - in the 'pipeline', at the time of cutting as possible. During the daylight hours humidity is lower than at night - or late in the evening. Low humidity speeds up evaporation of water from the stalk, foliage and buds. Transport of water up the stalk in the middle of the day may not be rapid enough to keep up with evaporation. Thus, the stalks when cut in the middle of the day may have less water and nutrients stored in them. After the stem is cut, reduced transport up the stalk will probably not be sufficient to make up for any such deficiency and may not even keep up with continuing evaporation. If the buds are relatively "dry" by the time they open, they will wilt more quickly and/or the flowers may not be as large. Obviously, the time of cutting is more important on a warm, sunny breezy day than on a cool, cloudy still day. (It may be somewhat of a risk to postpone cutting from early morning in the expectation of a cool cloudy day, how accurate are weather forecasts in the spring?)

As soon as possible after cutting the stalk, it should be placed in a full container of water and placed in the shade or indoors. The foliage at the base of the stalk should be removed at this time. Evaporation from foliage helps deplete available water in the stalk. Furthermore, bad foliage detracts from the scoring of the stalk by judges, good foliage adds little. While cutting, transporting and placing a stalk in a container, avoid handling the bud and avoid letting the bud touch anything. If you bruise the bud, the unsightly results will show up in the opened bloom. It is desirable that each individual stalk be placed in its own container so as to avoid one bud rubbing against another. It is also desirable to "wedge" the stalk at this time with plastic foam, paper toweling, etc., so as to hold the stalk firmly in the upright position in which it will be later shown. All of you have noticed how, when a stalk in the garden is not vertical that the buds will bend away



from the stalk and try to orient themselves in a vertical position as they grow and mature. They will do exactly the same thing if the stalk is not upright in the container. You should also attach a temporary label to the container with the name of the variety and the location from which it came in the garden. Remember, you will not see the flower at the time you cut the stalk and if you have incorrectly identified the clump from which it came a record of the location may help you identify it when it opens. For my own guidance, I also record the date the stalk was cut. If the stalk is to be allowed to flower without being held back by refrigeration or forced by heat, it should be stored in its container in a cool location out of direct sunlight. You should also be careful to allow enough space between containers to avoid contact between the open flower and other nearby stalks or flowers.

What about additives in the water? This subject was discussed after this paper was first presented at the Greater St. Louis Iris Society meeting, and it was suggested to me that adding sugar was advantageous. I tried corn syrup (glucose) at one tablespoon per gallon of water in 1992 - it seemed to help.

At what stage of development of the bud should the stalk be cut? Obviously, this depends upon how far ahead of the show date you cut the stalk. If you cut it the morning before the show, you should cut stalks on which the bud is very close to opening and would be expected to open during the day before the show if left on the plant. Bear in mind that storage in a cool location out of direct sunlight will slow down maturation and opening of the bud somewhat. Without question, cutting a mature bud the day before the show is the best practice. However, this substantially limits your choice of varieties to exhibit. In order to increase your potential, you may want to hold additional varieties back by refrigeration. I do this quite extensively.



If you elect to refrigerate, there are some factors of which you need to be aware:

Refrigeration, even at temperatures near the freezing point, only slows down maturation and opening of the bud, it does not stop this process. You must allow for continuing maturation during refrigeration. Since space in the refrigerator may be limited, you probably will not have enough space to separate containers far enough apart to prevent contact between adjacent open flowers. Thus, you should plan to remove the stalk from the refrigerator before the flowers open.

The longer the stalk stays in the refrigerator, the more critical timing becomes. Why? Although evaporation generally slows if everything else is equal, when temperature is lowered, everything else is not equal. The household refrigerator is a great dehumidifier and the air in the refrigerator is very dry. You cannot avoid gradual drying of the bud. The effect is that the life of the opened bloom is reduced. Since the opened bloom has more surface exposed to drying, this is another reason to avoid opening of the bloom while still in the refrigerator.

The extent to which refrigeration slows down maturation and opening varies from one variety to another. Thus you should inspect the stalks in the refrigerator periodically and, when appropriate take the container out and let it sit for awhile at room temperature until bloom maturation on the stalk catches up and then return it to the refrigerator.

How long may a stalk be kept in refrigeration? As discussed previously, drying of the bud and consequently its degradation takes place while the stalk is in the refrigerator. If this process of degradations continues for too long, the bud will no longer be capable of producing a good flower. In my experience, three or four days in refrigeration is usually acceptable. The "success rate" is quite high, generally in excess of 75% after four days, and proportionately even higher for shorter periods. Beyond four days, the "success rate" diminishes very rapidly to something on the order of 10% or so after a week. In the case of bearded irises, refrigeration for more than

a week has little chance of success. Beardless iris, and particularly spurias are somewhat more tolerant and ten days is not hopeless.

In my experience, the degree of flexibility which can be derived by forcing bloom is much more limited than can be gained by refrigeration. While refrigeration makes it possible to cut a stalk which would bloom in two days and delay bloom until as much as a week after cutting, I have never been able, as a practical matter to gain more than about a day by forcing. The most effective means of forcing which I have found is to place the stalk in the container in a heated and humid space. I have used our powder room for this, heating the small room with an electric to 100 to 110 F while maintaining high humidity by wetting towels and hanging them on the towel racks. Caution, if the temperature is too high, one can "cook" the stalk. Placing the stalk in hot water is substantially less effective.

- **CONDITION AND GROOMING**

The Judges Hand book allots 25 points to these factors. In practice, many judges attach even more importance to grooming. This aspect may best be covered simply by quoting from the Handbook, adding my comments where appropriate.

"Condition refers to the degree of visible improvement in the appearance of the specimen stalk as a result of grooming. Grooming involves those finishing touches the exhibitor makes so that the entry presents the best possible appearance."

- **STALK HEIGHT**

"It is generally recommended that a stalk be exhibited at an appropriate height that is proportional. Indeed proportion is an individual perception, and the suggestion here is only to avoid extremes. Stalks can behave unpredictably in strange weather or differing climates, so very few points can be subtracted under such circumstances."

Comments: we can all attest that the vagaries of the weather often result in considerable variations in the height of the stalk, this being particularly true in the case of the earlier classes which bloom while the weather is more unsettled. In order to maintain pleasing proportion in the exhibit, it is often necessary to position the stalk in the container with the end of the stalk above the bottom of the container. Adjust the stalk until it looks good to you.

- **FOLIAGE**

"Was all diseased foliage neatly removed or trimmed? Trimming is necessary when there is faint discoloration, disease or injury to leaf edges. Such procedure should remove less than one fourth inch of foliage edges and should follow the natural contour of the leaf in its entirety. Blunt edges or massive trimming is totally unacceptable."

Comments: you will have previously removed the foliage at the base of the stalk. Foliage which covers the juncture between a branch and the stalk or is at the base of a bud must be left in place although it may be trimmed.

- **SPATHES**

"If a flower has been removed, ascertain that the spathe has not been damaged and is intact. Detectable trimming of the spathe is unacceptable."

Comments: I will discuss the subject of removal of a flower and/or branch at some length following the quotations since this is of very great importance.

- BRANCHES

"A branch can be removed where a leaf conceals its connection to the stalk, but the stalk and foliage should not display any visible damage."

Comments: Suppose that you have removed a faded flower (or one that is beginning to fade). If there is an unopened bud remaining (the second bud in the socket) the branch with the unopened bud should be left in place. If there is no unopened bud, the entire branch should be removed.

- CLEANLINESS

"The stalk, flower and blooms should be clean with no dirt, dust or spray residues. Slight smudges or fingerprints on the stalks demand little penalty and are easily removed when the exhibitor gently wipes the stalk with soft tissue."

Comments: Dirt may have been splashed on the stalk by rain prior to when it was cut. This should be removed with a damp tissue or paper towel. It is much more difficult to remove dirt from the flower, another reason for cutting the stalk before the buds open. The powdery substance naturally present on the surface of the stalk is easily disturbed in handling the stalk. If fingerprints are noticeable as a result of handling, wiping the stalk to remove all of the powdery substance is the answer.

- INSECTS

"The presence of one or two aphids or other insects is no cause for alarm as these creatures can travel from stalk to stalk during or after entry. Infestation, however, is obviously a totally unacceptable condition."

Comments: Many judges do consider one or two aphids or a tiny spider as "cause for alarm." You should inspect the flowers and stalk for the presence and remove them by gently brushing. Most often, aphids will be found on the underside of the falls, escaping notice until they crawl around and become visible - to your consternation and to the disapproval of the judges.

- POSITION IN CONTAINER

"The bottom branch should be exhibited above the container's opening. If a stalk is leaning badly, the judge should check to see if it was originally wedged properly by the exhibitor. If that is the case, the judge should ask the clerk to reposition the stalk, realizing that it could have been jarred by a placement clerk."

Comments: Be sure that you always securely wedge the stalk in the container. In practice, very nearly all judges will assume that a leaning stalk was the exhibitors fault, not the placement clerks. Never simply stick the stalk in the container without wedging. I have found that flexible foam plastic is the best material to use for wedging. It provides permanent and gentle pressure to hold the stalk in place. Foam carpet underlay is about the right consistency.

- REMOVAL OF FLOWERS

As I indicated earlier, this is a very important subject. The Judge's Handbook states:

"Any flowers that appear on the specimen stalk must show no signs of aging either from natural processes or environment"
and also "One fading flower on a stalk will also cost the exhibitor the loss of a substantial number of points . . . "
and "As a flower ages, slightly detectable watery areas near the petal edges become visible, often causing some curving."

In my experience, the condition of the flowers is the one factor that judges pay most attention to. If one of the flowers on a stalk is aged - showing any signs of curling or showing the watery areas mentioned in the Handbook, it should be removed. Removal should be performed carefully so that no "stub" is visible. There is far less or often no penalty for having properly removed one flower from a stalk while leaving the good flowers in place, which, in practice, leaving a fading flower on the stalk is usually very severely penalized (no ribbon). If the only flower on the stalk is fading - forget it, throw the stalk away.

Frequently, we encounter an SDB stalk with two fresh flowers in which the lower of the two flowers seriously crowds the terminal flower. We could right maintain that this is the "normal" condition of the well grown stalk of the variety in question. However, the great majority of judges will severely penalize such a stalk and the exhibitor should carefully remove the lower of the two flowers. The same condition is sometimes encountered in IBs and more often the "branches" on IBs will be extremely short and the lower bloom(s) will be crowded up against the stalk. Again, although this may be a normal condition, if it is at all severe, remove the offending flower. These are the two instances in which it is appropriate to remove a "good" flower.

- EXHIBITION CONTAINERS

Insert the stalks into the containers in which they are to be exhibited before you leave home, wedge the stalk securely in place with plastic foam or paper (unless the show furnishes its own containers). You may also attach the entry card with a rubber band at this time.

- TRANSPORTING TO THE SHOW

It is easy, after you have done everything right to destroy your entries if you must make a sudden stop or go around a corner too rapidly. I place the containers with the stalks securely in place in plastic crates with empty bottles inserted between the full ones so that no flower can contact anything else and so that the pack is "solid" and the bottles will not fall over in case of a sudden stop. When you get to the show and as you place your entries on the show tables, check the grooming one more time.

- CLERKING

Now that you have gotten your bloom stalks to the show and groomed them carefully, it is time to sit back and wait for the results. Wrong!! You can learn a great deal about exhibiting and about some of the things which really count and may not be covered adequately in the Judges' Handbook by enlisting as a clerk. Although you cannot discuss matters with the judges while they are judging, if you have clerked for them, most will be glad to discuss their decisions with you after the judging is done. Don't stop after clerking once. There is a lot to be learned and once is not enough to learn it all. You will also find that different judges often have quite different interpretations of what is in the Handbook.