

Harvesting and Preparing Vegetables for Exhibit

Each time you select vegetables from the produce section of the grocery store you are judging. You select produce for freshness, cleanliness, good size and color, and freedom from mechanical, insect, and disease damage. You should, and probably do, look for the same qualities in your home-grown produce.

Selecting and preparing vegetables for exhibit at fairs involves some of the same skills used by people who sell produce. Vegetables should be harvested and prepared appropriately to maintain high quality as well as to look attractive. Quality and attractiveness encourage customers to select the vegetables on display.

Preparation and Handling Tips

When preparing vegetables for exhibit there are many important guidelines for best displays. Some of the criteria that judges will use to evaluate your exhibits are cleanliness, blemish-free, freshness, prime condition, uniformity, true-to-type, and labeling. Vegetables are typically exhibited on white paper plates. Check fair book for specific show guidelines.

Harvesting

Always use a sharp knife to make clean, straight cuts when harvesting or trimming vegetables. Do not pull fruits from the vine. This may result in a jagged tear on the stem. Vegetables should be fresh and in prime condition for eating at the time of judging. Harvest and prepare vegetables

(except onions and sweet potatoes) as close to the exhibition date as possible to prevent wilting and shriveling. If vegetables must be harvested a day or so before the fair, store them in plastic bags in the refrigerator.

The size of vegetables on exhibit should be typical of the crop and variety. Remember, the biggest doesn't always mean the best.

Uniformity must be considered when two or more specimens are required for an exhibit. A good vegetable exhibit is uniform in size, shape, color, maturity, and type.

All vegetables should be true-to-type, that is, typical of the crop and variety being exhibited. For example, cucumbers with curled ends are not true-to-type, nor is an elongated beet typical of the variety 'Detroit Dark Red'.

All fruits and vegetables on exhibit must be free of blemishes that may be caused by insects, diseases, and mechanical injury. Damage caused by rough treatment during harvest or transportation downgrades an exhibit. For example, it is not desirable to display root crops that have been injured while digging or to show squash with torn off stems. Pack vegetables carefully in cloth or paper when transporting them to the fair.

Cleaning

Clean vegetables are another important criteria for judging. Dirt detracts from the appearance of the vegetables. However, it is not

always advisable to clean vegetables by washing. Root crops, such as potatoes, that have been washed and scrubbed will wilt and shrivel after only a short time on display. Generally, less soil adheres to root vegetables if they are dug when the soil is relatively dry. If washing is necessary, soak roots in cool water, and gently wash with a stream of water or soft cloth. Never scrub with a hard-bristled brush.

Tender-skinned vegetables, such as summer squash and eggplant, must not be washed. Clean them by lightly brushing the dirt away with a soft-bristled paint brush.

Labeling

Label vegetables on display to indicate the type and cultivar (Type: tomato; Cultivar: 'Better Boy'). Labeling makes the exhibit more educational. Viewers may want to know and possibly grow the varieties on display as well as those that receive the top awards.

Guidelines for Preparing Vegetables for Exhibit

Beans (lima) *Phaseolus lunatus*

Best stage of maturity—Full size for variety, bright green, tender, fresh

Faults—Wilted, immature, variable color, rusted, or insect-damaged pods

Preparation—Pick before seeds reach full size. Seed color changes from dark green to light green and they become more starchy as they approach maturity.

Exhibit - six pods

Beans (snap) *Phaseolus vulgaris*

Best state of maturity—Uniform in color and size, straight, true to variety, small seeds, not more than half grown

Faults—Cracked pods, variable color, seeds too large; disease, insect or mechanical injury

Preparation—Brush with soft-bristled brush or soft dry cloth to remove dirt; leave 1/4 to 1/2 inch of stem on pod.

Exhibit - six pods

Beets *Beta vulgaris* var. *crassa*

Best stage of maturity—Smooth, firm, and uniform in color; 1 1/2 to 3 inches in diameter

Faults—Variable color, misshapen, rough or broken skin, oversized, insect or disease damage

Preparation—Trim tops to 1 1/2 to 2 inches in length (helps reduce wilting); leave up to 2 inches of tap root; brush to remove soil, or soak and gently wash in cold water; do not scrub because skin will break.

Exhibit - three specimens

Broccoli *Brassica oleracea* var. *italica*

Best stage of maturity—Firm heads, uniform color, tender and crisp, tight bud stage
Faults—Wilted, leaves in head, flowers open or showing yellow, depressed center, insect or disease damage

Preparation—Rinse with cold water; keep refrigerated until ready to exhibit; remove all leaves below the head; minimum diameter of head (or sprouts) is 3 inches; mini-mum length of stalk and head is 5 inches.

Exhibit - one head

Brussels Sprouts *Brassica oleracea* var. *gemmifera*

Best stage of maturity—Heads solid and firm, heavy for size

Faults—Light weight, loosely formed, not firm, wilted, split; insect, disease, or mechanical damage; peeled too much

Preparation—Do not peel excessively; two or three outer leaves should be left on; remove from stem.

Exhibit - five heads

Cabbage *Brassica oleracea* var. *capitata*

Best stage of maturity—Heads solid and firm, tender and crisp, heavy for size
Faults—Light weight, loosely formed, not firm, wilted, split; insect, disease, or mechanical damage; peeled too much

Preparation—Do not peel excessively; two or three outer leaves should be left on; trim stem close to head but leave no more than 1/2 inch of stem.

Exhibit - one head

Carrots *Daucus carota*

Best stage of maturity—Smooth, straight, uniform bright color, 1 to 1 1/2 inches in diameter at crown

Faults—Purple or green shoulders, too large or small, pale color, forked, crooked or cracked roots, insect or disease damage

Preparation—Trim tops to 1 to 1 1/2 inches in length; remove soil by brushing or wash in cold water. Do not scrub because skin will break.

Exhibit - three specimens

Guidelines for Preparing Vegetables for Exhibit

Cauliflower *Brassica oleracea* var. *botrytis*

Best stage of maturity—White, orange (yellow) or purple (depending on cultivar), crisp and solid, “jacket” leaves fresh and with uniform color

Faults—Poor color (yellow-brownish), grainy, excessively rough, wilted, insect or disease damage

Preparation—Trim “jacket” leaves even with top of head; some of the older leaves may be removed. Leave 1/4 to 1/2 inch of stem below bottom leaves.

Exhibit - one head

Celery *Apium graveolens* var. *dulce*

Best stage of maturity—Crisp, firm, thick, and uniform petioles (stalks); uniform color for type

Faults—Wilted, small size stalks, blemishes, split stalks, poor color for type; insect, disease, or mechanical injury

Preparation—Trim leaves uniformly and remove roots; wash in cold water and refrigerate until ready to exhibit.

Exhibit - one bunch

Chinese cabbage *Brassica rapa* var. *pekinensis*

Best stage of maturity—Tight, solid heads with clean, bright color; heavy for size **Faults**—Loose wilted heads, poor color, blemishes, showing insect or disease damage, too many outer leaves removed

Preparation—Keep one or two outer leaves on head; trim butt close to head; wash in cold water to remove soil and keep refrigerated until ready to exhibit.

Exhibit-one head

Corn (sweet) *Zea mays*

Best stage of maturity—Kernels fully grown and in milk stage; well filled, good color, and even rows; fresh, bright green husks

Faults—Too immature or overmature; crooked, uneven rows; cob not filled to tip; insect damage; dried husks

Preparation—Remove husk from one side of ear (corn deteriorates rapidly if entire husk is removed); trim silk to within 1 inch of tip of husk; trim shank (stem holding ear) to butt (bottom end of ear).

Exhibit - two ears

Cucumbers *Cucumis sativus*

Best stage of maturity—Straight, dark green color; crisp and firm

Faults—Misshapen or crooked fruit, insect or mechanical damage, oversized, yellowish color, overmature, no stem

Preparation—Leave 1/2 inch of stems; wipe clean with soft cloth.

Exhibit - Pickling (2 to 3 inches) five specimens Dill (5 inches.) two specimens Slicing (6 to 8 inches) two specimens

Dill *Anethum graveolens*

Best stage of maturity—Light green with mature seed; ready to use

Faults—Immaturity, small size

Preparation—Cut seed heads with 10- to 12-inch stems.

Exhibit - two heads tied near lower end of stems and again just below seed heads

Eggplant *Solanum melongena* var. *esculentum*

Best stage of maturity—Firm, shiny; medium to large size; uniform color (purple, green, orange, white, or bicolor); light thumb pressure will leave a dent at the proper harvest stage; small blossom scar; fresh green calyx (the leaf-like cover of the flower and the eggplant)

Faults—Too small, off color for type, dried calyx, dull color, immature **Preparation**—Do not wash; wipe with soft cloth if necessary; leave 1-inch stem. **Exhibit** - one specimen

Guidelines for Preparing Vegetables for Exhibit

Garlic *Allium sativum*

Best stage of maturity—Clean, smooth, brightly colored bulbs with dry necks Faults—Rough, off-colored bulbs; necks green and immature; missing or broken sheaths or cloves; blemished; roots or tops too closely cut

Preparation—Leave 1 inch of stem attached; trim roots to within 1/4 inch of bulb; brush off soil; do not remove sheath; do not wash.

Exhibit - three specimens

Herbs (See also Dill)

Best stage of maturity—Fresh, clean, proper harvest stage for use

Faults—Dirty, wilted foliage; flowering or improper stage for kitchen use; improperly labeled

Preparation—Rinse in cold water.

Exhibit - 1 sprig (4 to 6 inches long) per bottle

Kale *Brassica oleracea var. acephala*

Best stage of maturity—Dark green, crisp fresh leaves; bright, clean stems Faults—Insect damage to leaves; dirty, wilted, poorly colored leaves; seed stalk present

Preparation—Remove discolored outer leaves; place roots in jar of water.

Exhibit - one plant

Kohlrabi *Brassica oleracea var. gongylodes*

Best stage of maturity—1 1/2 to 3 inches in diameter, tender, good color

Faults—Too large, tough, poor color, misshapen, dirty; insect, disease, or weather damage

Preparation—Cut leaves 1 to 2 inches in length; trim roots 1 to 2 inches below “ball.”

Exhibit - two specimens

Lettuce, leaf *Lactuca sativa*

Best stage of maturity—Fresh, crisp, well-colored leaves

Faults—Leaves are wilted, yellow, damaged, or dirty

Preparation—Remove older outer leaves that show yellowing; place roots in jar of water.

Exhibit - one plant

Muskmelon *Cucumis melo*

Best stage of maturity—Pick at full maturity when stem separates readily and completely from fruit (full-slip); medium size and fragrant

Faults—Harvested too soon (half-slip), poorly colored, decay spots, pest or mechanical damage, over- or under-ripe

Preparation—Do not wash; use soft-bristled brush to clean.

Exhibit - one specimen

Okra *Hibiscus esculentus*

Best stage of maturity—Small, straight, uniform pods not over 3 inches long; consistent green or red color

Faults—Pods large and woody, hard, crooked

Preparation—Leave 1/2-inch stem attached to pod.

Exhibit - three specimens

Guidelines for Preparing Vegetables for Exhibit

Onions (dry) *Allium cepa*

Best stage of maturity—Firm, mature, well-shaped bulbs; true to variety; small neck that is well dried; heavy for size; 2 inches or more in diameter; uniform color and finish

Faults—Peeled bulb; sunscalded, immature, misshapen, double or split bulbs; large soft neck; poor color, size, and finish; disease, insect, or mechanical injury

Preparation—Harvest early (approximately 2 weeks before exhibiting) and cure thoroughly; do not remove outer scales; do not wash; trim tops 1 inch above bulb; trim roots to 1/4 inch.

Exhibit - three specimens

Onions (green) *Allium cepa*

Best stage of maturity—1/2 to 3/4 inch in diameter, straight, white stem and dark green leaves

Faults—Too small or too large, crooked, poor color, dry or discolored leaves, heavily peeled, enlarged bulbs

Preparation—Remove loose skin, cut tops 4 to 5 inches above white shank; trim roots to 1/2 inch.

Exhibit - one bunch of five onions tied in middle

Parsnips *Pastinaca sativa*

Best stage of maturity—Medium to large size (less than 2 inches in diameter and 7 inches long); clean, smooth, firm, uniformly tapered root; clear color

Faults—Too small; poorly colored, blemished, crooked or misshapen roots; side roots present; green shoulders

Preparation—Trim tops to 1 inch in length; soak and wash in cool water; trim off side roots but do not trim off lower portions of tap root.

Exhibit - three specimens

Peas (edible pod) *Pisum sativum*

Best stage of maturity—Tender, flat pods with seed just beginning to form, bright green color

Faults—Seed maturing, pods swelled or damaged, pods tough

Preparation—Pick with stems; use soft-bristled brush to remove soil.

Exhibit - six pods

Peas (unshelled) *Pisum sativum*

Best stage of maturity—Bright green, well-filled pods with seeds in eating stage

Faults—Poorly filled pods, dull or whitish green color, pods shriveled or drying, blemished; seeds shriveled, starchy, or bitter

Preparation—Pick with stem, rinse with cool water to clean.

Exhibit - six pods

Pepper (bell) *Capsicum annuum*

Best stage of maturity—Large, firm, blocky with dark color (red, yellow, green, orange, purple); large for variety, crisp and heavy, uniform in size and color

Faults—Badly misshapen, rough, too small, off color, wilted, lightweight, dirty; show signs of sunscald, mechanical injury, insect, or disease damage

Preparation—Leave 1/2 to 1 inch of stems attached.

Exhibit - two specimens

Guidelines for Preparing Vegetables for Exhibit

Pepper (hot) *Capsicum annuum*

Best stage of maturity—Firm, with dark color (red, green, yellow, orange, or purple); crisp and uniform in size and color

Faults—Badly misshapen, rough, too small, off color, wilted, lightweight, dirty; show signs of sunscald, mechanical injury, insect, or disease damage

Preparation—Leave 1/2 to 1 inch of stems attached.

Exhibit - five specimens

Potatoes *Solanum tuberosum*

Best stage of maturity—Firm, medium size (6 to 10 ounces), uniform color

Faults—Mechanical, insect, or disease damage; unusually deep eyes for variety; poor color, green color, hollow heart, knobby, or growth cracks

Preparation—Do not wash; dig from dry soil and use soft-bristled brush or soft cloth to remove soil.

Exhibit - three specimens

Pumpkin *Cucurbita pepo*

Best stage of maturity—Thick flesh (heavy for size); clean, hard rind; true to type in size, shape, and color

Faults—Light weight for size, stem removed, color and shape not typical of variety, scars and blemishes, insect or disease damage

Preparation—Leave 2 inches of stem attached; wipe and polish with a soft cloth.

Exhibit - one specimen

Radishes *Raphanus sativus*

Best stage of maturity—Roots are 1 to 1 1/2 inches in diameter; fresh, crisp, uniform color, and smooth.

Faults—Wilted or soft roots, poorly colored, rough, or blemished; oversized or split

Preparation—Gently wash in cool water; remove only the discolored or injured leaves.

Exhibit - one bunch of five, tied at base of leaves

Rhubarb *Rheum rhabarbarum*

Best stage of maturity—Young, tender stalks, uniform color, approximately 1 inch in diameter

Faults—Tough, blemished, overmature, poorly colored stalks; lower end of stalks cut

Preparation—Pull, do not cut stalks; trim leaves so only 1 inch of leaf blade remains attached to stalk.

Exhibit - one bunch of three stalks tied at both ends

Spinach *Spinacea oleracea*

Best stage of maturity—Uniformly colored, clean, fresh, crisp leaves

Faults—Wilted, poorly colored, blemished, insect-damaged leaves

Preparation—Wash in cold water; pull entire plant, trim off roots to crown, remove outer damaged leaves; place in jar of water to prevent wilting.

Exhibit - one plant

Squash (summer) *Cucurbita pepo*

Best stage of maturity—rind should be soft; long-fruited varieties (zucchini-type) should be 4 to 8 inches in length; flat or scalloped types should be 3 to 5 inches in diameter

Faults—Stem removed; large, overmature or oversized fruits; scarred skins, wilted or soft fruit

Preparation—Leave 1 to 2 inches of stem attached; do not wash; use soft-bristled brush to clean.

Exhibit - two specimens

Guidelines for Preparing Vegetables for Exhibit

Squash (winter) *Cucurbita pepo*, *Cucurbita maxima*

Best stage of maturity—Rind should be hard and glossy with fully developed color; medium to large fruits that are true to variety in size, color, and shape

Faults—Immature fruits with light color; soft or damaged rind; insect or mechanical damage; stem removed; green, soft stem

Preparation—Leave 2 inches of stem attached; wipe clean.

Exhibit - one specimen

Sweet potatoes *Ipomoea batatas*

Best stage of maturity—Medium size (2 to 4 inches diameter); smooth, brightly colored

Faults—Rough, off color, bruised roots; show evidence of insect, disease, or mechanical injury; poorly shaped, too small, or too large; excessively dirty

Preparation—Dig 7 to 10 days before exhibiting to cure; do not wash; clean with a soft-bristled brush or cloth.

Exhibit - two specimens

Swiss chard *Beta vulgaris var. cicla*

Best stage of maturity—Leaves 8 to 12 inches long; bright, tender stalks; clean, fresh, well-colored leaves and stalks

Faults—Wilted, poorly colored, insect- or disease-damaged leaves

Preparation—Wash in cold water; place in jar of water to prevent wilting.

Exhibit - six leaves

Tomatoes *Lycopersicon esculentum*

Best stage of maturity—Firm fruits that are heavy in relation to size, typical of variety, uniform in size and color, ripe, smooth and well shaped.

Faults—Poor color, green shoulders, sunscald, too large or too small, misshapen, insect or disease damage, cracked fruit, stems left attached; over-ripe fruit are likely to be soft and “leaky”

Preparation—Pick mature but firm fruits; remove stems; clean with soft cloth.

Exhibit—Standard type fruit—three specimens Cherry, pear, or grape type fruit—10 specimens

Turnips *Brassica rapa var. rapifera*

Best stage of maturity—Roots 2 to 3 inches in diameter, smooth skin and firm flesh, uniform color

Faults—Poorly colored, soft, spongy, too large, rough skin, excessively dirty, side roots present; show evidence of insect, disease, or mechanical injury

Preparation—Leave 1 to 2 inches of tops; leave at least 2 inches of tap root; soak and wash in cold water; do not scrub.

Exhibit - three specimens

Watermelon *Citrullus lanatus*

Best stage of maturity—Ground spot shows yellowish background color, dull gloss, in best eating stage, medium to large size, shape and color typical of variety

Faults—Immature or over-ripe, poor color, misshapen, blemished

Preparation—Leave 1 to 2 inches stem; wipe with moist cloth.

Exhibit - one specimen