

## How to Win At Iris Shows

Some iris lovers grow irises as garden plants to supply beautiful flowers each spring in their home garden, while others grow irises simply to cut the stalks and enter them in exhibition competition in various shows, so they can bring home ribbons, rosettes, and cumbersome trophies and trays that have to be cared for throughout the ensuing year. If you belong to the second category, here are a few tips to help you win more awards.



Irises must be kept watered while their stalks are emerging from the plant rhizomes. As the branching placement is revealed, one must learn how to manipulate the developing stalk if it appears that branches will be too close to the stalk itself. Rolled newspaper or small medicine bottles can act as wedges to force branches away from the main stem of the stalk. One may have to attend daily to the "wedges" to be sure that they have not slipped out of place and allowed the developing branch to return to its normal growth habits.

Annual spring and autumn cleanup of spent foliage can alleviate many leaf spot problems, but aphids can be a "big" problem, and they readily spread leaf spot throughout the garden. Use an insecticide to control aphids in the garden throughout the year. No one likes to see an iris specimen in the annual show ruined by unsightly leaf spot or aphids.

Irises tend to bloom earlier in areas where there are a lot of structures and evening lights. If your favorite flower is planted too close to your house, the heat from the house during the evening hours will make the plants bloom at least several days earlier than the same cultivar planted way out in the garden away from structures and concrete driveways.

No matter what you plan, the weather determines what happens to your bloom each year. If the season is late, a good dose of "Miracle Grow" will speed the stalk development up somewhat. If the weather turns cold and rainy, the developing stalks will just sit there and refuse to grow until it gets warm enough.

Try to leave every stalk you plan to exhibit out in the garden on the plant until the very last moment. Irises look much better if they are allowed to open naturally in the garden. Sometimes they just don't open right once they have been cut and taken inside and put under air conditioning or forced heat air circulation.

A specimen with only one open flower can be judged "Best Specimen of the Show." More often than not, we all know that many judges prefer two or three open flowers on a best specimen stalk. This is the place where the most important technique of exhibition judging comes into play. Every iris grower who has ever entered an iris show has heard the word "grooming." This isn't some alien word, which has an unclear meaning. It is the very essence, which separates the experienced iris exhibitors from the inexperienced iris exhibitors. Flower show judges will tell you, "If it isn't groomed correctly, it's not going win a darn blue ribbon!" How true that statement is when one visits an iris show. The exhibitor who went the extra mile to properly groom his or her specimen is the one who reaps the show awards.

To properly groom iris show specimens, the following items are a must for every exhibitor. A plastic or Rubbermaid tackle box, a sharp knife, a "lot" of Q-Tips, one film canister (for water), sharp manicure scissors, rubber bands, entry tags, cosmetic brush and loose facial powder. Make sure that

you have several rolls of cheap paper towels to wrap around cut stems as you carry them to place the cut stalks in bottles for transportation to the preparation area.

The sharp knife is used to sever the stalk at the base of the plant where it emerges from the rhizome. Once you cut the stalk and transport it to the preparation area, then the Q-Tips, film canister, and manicure scissors are ready to be used. All cut stalks are transported to show or preparation sites by automobile after being placed in small-mouthed wine bottles. Water is placed in the film canister. The Q-Tips are dipped in the water to aid in the removal of foreign matter from the open flowers-things such as aphids, various small spiders, dirt, spider webs, and pollen. The manicure scissors can remove up to 1/4" foliage, which has been damaged by leaf spot or insect grazing. The spent terminal blooms and brown sheaths at the base of the flowers can be neatly trimmed away if necessary.

Be sure that you have a copy of the show schedule for the show you are entering. It outlines the specific rules one must follow in preparing entries. Rubber bands are used to place entry tags on specimen bottles. The iris checklists and R & I booklets should be taken to the show so that you can make sure that you have accurately completed the entry tags and spelled the iris names properly.

Before entries close, take a walk through and double check each specimen you entered and repair any damage caused by the placement committee person. Give yourself plenty of time to groom your entries and be out of the exhibition room before the show entry deadline. You show a discourtesy to the show chairperson, as well as your fellow exhibitors, if you consistently run late entering your blooms.

Never find yourself guilty of doing the following awful things to your iris show specimens. No-No's include the following: writing the name of the specimen on that portion of the stalk below the water level in the bottle with a permanent marker. This will not help its chances of winning a ribbon. The tape with the specimen's name written on it should be removed from the bottle too. Please do not secure the entry tag to the specimen by using straight pins or paper clips and running it through the stalk where the stalk touches the bottle top. Leaving spent blooms in bud sockets to show how many have already bloomed on that stalk will not win a ribbon. Seedlings are the only entries entered not groomed.

Any specimen with only one flower half opened should probably not be entered, unless there is very bright natural light, and warmth that may get it to open before judging. Thoroughly check each specimen entered to make sure it has all its flower parts. In the hurried rush to get specimens entered, often-missing standards, falls, or even beards go unnoticed. The same is true with extra flower parts. More is not better by any means. If you break a standard or fall while transporting the specimen to the show, please do not tape it back into place. Hot gluing a stalk back together is not ethical either. Adding additional flowers to a stalk cannot be done either. One last "NO-NO": if you are unsure of a name for your variety-leave it at home. We have all misplaced a name or two at one time or another. I know it probably was the prettiest stalk you had, but words cannot describe how embarrassing the situation will be if the cultivar wins an award and at the last moment, someone has the variety "checked" in the R & I and it is misnamed-named.

Many people ask how to we transport specimens to the shows over long distances. The prepared stalks are placed in large wine bottles with water and placed in boxes with dividers to keep them separated. Once again, if you can grow the specimens well and learn proper grooming techniques, then the exhibitor's world will be a window of opportunity for future iris show awards.



## Do You Want To Be A Show Winner?

Now isn't it silly to ask an iris grower if they want to be a show winner. Of course everyone wants to win the top prizes in a show, especially if the award also includes a new iris. Since I entered my first show I have become more conscious of the true value of iris shows. They give people an opportunity to see the new things without traveling around the state to the various gardens only to find that the things they most wanted to see are not in bloom. Let's talk about winners in the iris show.

First, it is easier to win a ribbon in the categories where there is less competition. Take the spuria iris section for instance. Many people do not grow this type of iris, so therefore, they cannot enter them in a show. It takes only ten entries in a section to qualify it for a Best in Section award so grow enough that you can have most of the entries. It makes it much easier to win.

Another example are the medians. Of course, their popularity is increasing so rapidly that soon most gardens are going to have an abundance of them. The large number of entries in the different shows proves that this is a class that is no longer forgotten. But the medians are twice as easy to transport as the taller models. You can pick a specimen with open flowers and have little fear of its being damaged by the time you get to the show. This easy transport is also known by the judges so they are very strict with their judging. Still it is smart to enter medians in a show to win a few top awards.

One more tip, the more unusual the flower is colorwise, the more likely it is to win. There's something about an unusual color that seems to catch the judge's eye. The judges don't vote on color; they look for all the things a judge is supposed to look for when judging an exhibition of iris, but when all other things are equal the odd or unusual colors seems to do far better.

If your goal is to win "Queen of the Show" with a tall bearded iris, it is harder to do in a multiple class show. Watch which varieties win the most often in other shows and grow those iris, as they tend to bloom at the correct time and have the genetic traits that make them perform consistently over the years.

To win the Silver Medal of the show, enter as many different sections of the horticulture division as you can. Grow more of the beardless varieties. By entering more sections you increase your chances of winning because most people tend to enter the limit in the tall bearded sections and forget that they can win blue ribbons in the other sections which will count toward the Silver Medal just the same.

In a variety show, a variety has a better chance at winning a blue ribbon if it doesn't have stiff competition. There may be 7 or 8 entries of a popular iris that everyone grows. There can be only one blue ribbon. So, grow and enter varieties not as likely to be grown or entered by other people. Of course, this other variety must be a show quality entry or you will be wasting your time. The judges are not going to give a blue ribbon to something just because it is the only one of its kind entered. Look around the garden, there have to be many things which can be entered and not have dozens of competitors for the blue ribbon when you get them to the show.

By all means keep in mind that it is best to watch the garden for several days before the show. Keep your eye open for something that looks like it might be worthy of entering in the show. You can refrigerate them for several days and hope that they still look good enough to enter when show time arrives, but it is difficult and yields only about 1/3 quality iris to enter.

The real purpose of shows is to give the public a chance to see how lovely an iris is, and for the exhibitors to have fun. This year when you add new iris to your garden, get some medians, some beardless, some arilbreds, some spuria, some species, and add some tall-bearded which are consistent winners. Good luck in next year's show, and if you don't win the prize you've hoped for next year, try, try again.

