

HOME & GARDEN

Uniformity is vital if you're hoping for a blue ribbon

By PAT LEUCHTMAN
Reorder Columnist

Last Friday afternoon my husband and I were racing around the garden rows. "More beans! More beans! Do you think this carrot is straight enough? Is this beet the same size as the other?"

We were making preparations for the Heath Fair. I had picked vegetables in the morning, but when my husband cast his eye over my prospective entries, he said we could do better. Thus our dash through the garden, but by 4 o'clock I had my entries labeled and on the exhibit hall table because I had to be at my outpost to accept the flower and houseplant entries. (I left the home guard to decide what to do with all the rejected beans and green tomatoes.)

I'm proud to say that my wax beans and my zucchini did win blue ribbons. Feel I have gotten off to a good start, but I am already thinking of next year.

Fair season isn't over though and I went to visit Cheryl Fitzgerald. Cheryl is a veteran of many Franklin County Fairs, many times a prize winner and this year she is head of publicity and advertising for the fair. She has often accompanied judges on their rounds of the hall so she has a good idea of what fair judges are really looking for in a blue ribbon winner.

"Uniformity is vital," Cheryl was emphatic. "Vegetables and fruits must be uniform in size and color and shape." She

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explained that entries don't have to be the perfect size for eating. They can be immature, but every bean on the plate of 15 must be equally immature and of the same length and thickness. I now know from my own experience just how many beans are going to have to be picked to find the identical twins.

Cheryl recommends a careful reading of the premium booklet and then says there are certain conventions to observe that are not necessarily listed. First off, be sure you enter the exact number of specimens required. A plate of six tomatoes is automatically disqualified because plates of five tomatoes are required. Then remember that vegetables cannot be washed but only brushed off. However, fruit can be polished even though polishing removes the "bloom" and this means the fruit will ripen faster. Cheryl says she has polished every single apple in a bushel exhibit before bringing it down to the Roundhouse.

Main tap roots on vegetables like carrots and beets should be left intact and the top cut off about 1½ to 2 inches from the root. The brown skins should be left on onions. Stems should be left on beans and squash and pears and apples. This is going to mean some careful picking. I'm usually pretty

casual about harvesting beans, often just pinching them off the plant, but at fair time I go out with my little scissors. Cheryl says to be careful picking fruit "because you don't want to pull off the fruit spur that will produce next season's fruit." Fair or not she says it is really important to pick apples and pears with their stems otherwise they will rot very quickly. (Although stems must be left on, leaves must be removed.) Cheryl also notes that fruit entries must be named and labeled. For instance, a plate of five Clapp pears must be labeled "Clapp."

There is equal emphasis on uniformity in the flower exhibits. Pick five blooms that are most nearly identical in size, color and shape. Also make sure they tend to be on the young side so they will not shed all their petals before the judging takes place.

Uniformity and neatness are of paramount importance in the canning classes. Jars should be clean and clearly labeled. If a collection is being exhibited, all the jars should be the same size and even have the same design pressed into the glass. Make sure the outside of your jars are wiped clean and polished. Cheryl says, "The contents of canned entries should be uniform — the beans cut into identical pieces for instance, and the judges don't want to see vegetable parts included that should have been discarded like the little core of the tomato."

She had some tips for those entering other classes in the fair. She recommends typing the recipes required with baked goods. At least print them carefully and legibly. "Judges look for even browning with no dark spots. Breads should have nicely rounded tops with no dents and an even texture. Fruit pies should have no juice spilled on the crust or bubbled out from between the crusts." Baked entries should be wrapped in plastic bags or saran wrap that is neatly fitted and taped.

After my talk with Cheryl Fitzgerald I realized that growing beautiful high quality vegetables may not be enough to win me a blue ribbon. Presentation counts for a lot. Read the premium booklet carefully and think about the implications of all the directions.

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