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West

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### Preparing for Success

Every year in the first week of June, I desperately search my property for the perfect flower. I wake up early to look, and there is a refreshing crisp coolness in the morning as I hope there are any for me to cut. Most of my iris stalks are past bloom, or the flowers are not open, or they are in the perfect state but tattered from the early summer winds. After my grandma died in 2014, I kept going to her empty house and discovered these irises in the overgrown beds. I moved the plants to my house and tended to them, learned about growing them, and admired their beauty. One day, a few years later, my mom and I were at D&B Supply and my local iris society was having an iris sale. I got recruited into the iris society, bought my registered varieties, planted them, and waited for the next summer to attend the annual iris show. That breakdown of events sounds simple, but there is a lot that goes into exhibiting in an iris show. Though a lot of the iris show outcome is up to fate and chance, likelihood of success can be raised by taking preventative measures.

Each plant only blooms for about a week out of the year, so the flowers have to demand attention from people walking by to be worth growing. Irises are an old-fashioned flowering plant that ranges from less than eight inches tall to over four feet tall. The plants typically have more than one flower on a stem and the flower itself has six petals. The top petals (standards) cup upwards to a central point and the bottom petals (falls) unfurl downwards, elegantly laying and pointing towards the ground. Some people have truly fallen in love with irises and choose to breed them to try and achieve specific characteristics, “so now virtually every color can be found

except true red. And the combinations! . . . the possibilities seem endless” (Tankesley-Clarke 24). Hybridizers spend years choosing the best offspring and submit them to be registered in the American Iris Society (AIS). They can then be exhibited at iris shows and win awards, which are very helpful with advertising and selling. Everyday flower enthusiasts then buy these registered hybrids and proudly grow them and then can display them at these shows. All irises in the shows must be registered in the AIS to be judged and given placements.

Before the show begins, participants have to cut their stalks. The stalk is cut close to the rhizome of the plant. There is a window of time that is ideal for flowers and missing it can make all the difference in show performance. A sign for a good cut iris is that the flower has just opened. Checking the flowers the night before and marking the stalks with flowers that are beginning to open will narrow down choices when it is time to cut in the morning. Being prepared by cutting multiple stalks of a single variety can be beneficial in case there is damage to one, if one begins to wilt before judging, or if not many flowers have opened yet. One year it was particularly windy before the show, and I didn't have many varieties to bring so I had to cut my stalks earlier than usual. I cut my stalks the night before the show and brought them inside my house to protect the delicate petals from weather damage. I protected them as much as I could by cutting them early so I had a better chance to participate in that year's show. It takes years of growing to be able to bring specific varieties to the shows, “so it's important to cut and condition them carefully so that they look good for as long as possible” (“Your” 70). Cutting stalks within the optimal window and being prepared for damage is an advisable way to prevent disappointment in show specimens.

While cutting stalks, it is extremely helpful to label them with their registered names, either physically or digitally. Labeling stalks is important because to be entered, the variety needs to be registered. Iris varieties can look almost identical, and for serious participants, a big

garden can have a lot of registered names to remember. Labeling the stalks by writing on tape on the stems or taking pictures and digital labeling are ways to save time and prevent confusion when staging the specimens before the show. I've heard of gardeners using spreadsheets or drawn-out maps of gardens to keep the variety names from getting lost, but I personally use my photo app, or I post photos to social media with their names in the captions. I take clear pictures of the flowers and type out their registered name, the hybridizer, what category (size) they are, and when they were registered. All of that information is required to exhibit a stalk in the show, so having it on hand and ready makes the show easier, especially if a participant has a lot of specimens to enter and time is short.

Once the participant has chosen and cut their stalks, transportation is the next step. Transporting irises to the venue of the show can be high risk, so participants need to practice extreme caution. In showing, the flower is the most important part of the specimen. The structure of the branches and number of flowers is desirable, but a perfectly balanced stalk with an ideal number of buds is only as good as the flower's condition. Breaking petals on open flowers is easy to do and any imperfection like a tear impacts the quality of the specimen. When I participated in my annual local iris show in 2023, I was running late. I took an unfamiliar route due to construction and had to slam on my truck's brakes, which almost sent my only two stalks flying into the dash. I had the stalks in mason jars, which did not support the tall flower, and it spun around as I drove. Luckily, I did not ruin my flowers and when I arrived, I got ideas from experienced exhibitors who used creative ways of packing stalks, such as using cut up pool noodles in five-gallon buckets. As evidence of their fragility, bearded irises "are not often seen in commercial floral designs mainly because the blossoms are difficult to ship" (Eskilson 58). Iris cultivation and exhibition has become very competitive and refined with high standards, so it is important that potential grand champion and best of class specimens are treated very carefully.

The method of transportation used for potential show stalks can make a difference in ribbons awarded or could make the stalk unworthy of show altogether.

Once the stalks are safely at the venue of the show, participants choose a table to begin the staging and presentation of their specimens. Recommended supplies for staging are a good knife or scissors for cutting stems, packing material such as polyfill or cotton balls to keep the stem in place, and a soft rag to wipe dust or fingerprints off of stems. The presentation of the stalks along with the condition of the flower determines ribbon placement. I began as an incredibly uneducated iris exhibitor only three years ago, and the first year I participated in a show, I did not arrive with any supplies for staging. Luckily, I had a LOT of help and support from seasoned members who let me borrow materials to keep my stalks from going too far below the rim of the vase. Without materials to keep the stalks in place, the lowest branch of the stalk can go below the rim of the vase, which is an immediate lower ribbon placement in my region's judging. I have seen those situations happen a lot, and it is disheartening for exhibitors that didn't know about the rule when putting their displays together. Being aware of the presentation expectations allows for better judging of the flowers and higher awards for entries.

Iris shows are competitive and there are expectations of great quality. There tends to be a steep learning curve for people who are new to the shows, which can be eased by doing online research about shows, attending iris society meetings, listening to the judges during judging, and making close friends who will go out of their way to help. Listening to judges argue placement using very specific reasons has been entertaining and helpful for future shows. Learning from mistakes also creates awareness and caution in iris exhibitors. Perfection and best of show awards are achievable by being prepared and having a little luck.

## Works Cited

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