

Bitten by the Exhibition Bug

...a series by Jeff Mogilewicz consulting rosarian

INTRODUCTION: What the Exhibitor Knows

You might say that I've had some luck as an exhibitor, and I'd be the first to tell you that I've had more good luck than you know! Yes, it's true that "the harder you work, the luckier you get," but every once in a while, some magic just happens that you get to take credit for. I'm all for magic!

Still, the basic requirements for becoming a successful rose exhibitor are hard work and a lot of knowledge. You have to grow great roses and you have to know what sets the winning roses apart from the "also rans." It also helps to have a competitive spirit.

In the coming months, this column will focus on different aspects of exhibiting, and I'll occasionally turn the column over to a guest exhibitor for a different perspective. Whole books have been written on exhibiting, so it shouldn't be difficult to select topics. Today, however, I just want to address the need for good roses. Even if you're not an exhibitor (yet) you have to start with the fundamentals.

Before you even get to the rose show, you have to make some good decisions and do a lot of work. You study the rose catalogs, you read the Horizon Roses reports, and you see what the other exhibitors are showing, and then you select the right roses for your garden. You pick roses that have superior form, color, size, and growth habit.

Then you select a place in the sun to plant the roses in good soil, give them a lot of water and the right nutrients, protect them like you would your children, and watch them grow.

Along the way, you stake them up properly, prune them judiciously, deadhead them regularly, and observe their behavior under a wide range of conditions. At this point you're not just growing the best roses you can, you're educating yourself as well.

If you want to *show* them, you've got to *know* them! Before a good exhibitor can take a rose to a show, a lot of things have to be determined. How long does it take for your rose to go from bud to bloom to fully open? How does the flower behave when it's exposed to bright sunlight over a couple of days? How does the bloom react when it gets wet from rain or fog or high humidity? How much does the color change when the bloom is refrigerated? Does the cut rose last more than one day without losing its substance? Can you do anything to encourage the bloom to open more slowly or quickly? Does the construction of the bloom lend itself to manipulation?

For example, take the hybrid tea variety *Angela Lansbury*. I've grown her for about six years now, and only recently figured out how to get her to the awards table. She hates water on the petals, she can't stand to be refrigerated for more than a couple of hours without losing her color, and she doesn't like to have her petals pried or positioned. This is one rose that simply has to be *ready* within about 18 hours of the show. But when she's ready, Wow! A beautiful pink rose with a very high, tightly spiraled center, large glossy foliage, long stems with few prickles, and pretty good size and

symmetry. She holds her center very well for up to 24 hours, and after she opens, she looks nice as a cut flower for several more days. (But I could never get her into an Open Bloom category!)

One of the best exhibitors in the nation today is John Mattia of Connecticut. I met him at the Orlando national show a few years ago, and asked him about his skill as an exhibitor, and whether he had any great techniques for turning a pretty good bloom into a great exhibit. In response, he reminded me of a well-known adage: "You can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear." That is, you have to start with great roses if you expect to win anything! And that, my rose-growing friends, is why we TRS exhibitors constantly emphasize the need for good horticultural practices.

We know that exhibiting isn't for everyone, but it is important for every rose lover to grow the best roses he or she can. For you never know...you could be working in your garden one day, and get bitten by the exhibition bug! Be prepared.

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ONE: Bitten!

Since being bitten by the exhibiting bug, I've learned a lot about what it takes to win consistently. That's not to say that I win consistently...because I don't! But I know what I would need to do to improve my chances of getting roses up to the awards table.

The first thing I would need to do is plant more bushes! The best exhibitors usually have multiple bushes for each variety that they plan to show. You should really have at least two of each variety, but three or four would be even better. That makes it easy for you to vary the schedule with which you cut for the shows, so that you've always got roses blooming on one bush while the other is at some other point in the six-week bloom cycle. And of course, the more flowers you have to choose from as you head for the show, the better your chances of coming up with a winner!

That's not to say you can't win with only one bush of each variety, as I have in my limited garden (57 big roses and 12 Minis: NO duplicates!). Nor do you necessarily have to focus on growing all the latest and greatest show roses (I've gotten Queens out of Peace, Limelight, and Double Delight, for example).

No, I think the trick is to walk through your garden often and look for winners as they are developing. A critical eye can often spot a winner almost as soon as the sepals come down. You're looking for that long, straight stem, with the perfectly formed fat bud that stands upright, free of any insect, wind, or spray damage. You need to identify the potential winners in time to do something to protect and prepare the bloom.

Remember what I always say? You have to know 'em to show 'em. Know how early you need to cut each variety, based on your knowledge of how fast the bloom opens, how long it can be refrigerated, and whether it will increase in size after cutting.

The precautions that some exhibitors take to protect their show blooms while they're still on the bush can be almost comical! From wiring little bamboo skewers to hold the stems straight, to erecting little umbrellas over them to keep the rain off, to putting bags over their buds and blooms to protect them from nighttime moisture and bugs! (Wait...that last one isn't so funny...that's what I've been known to do!) One of our own TRS exhibitors tells of the time she had to issue a warning to a young neighbor who thought she had permission to cut a flower whenever she wanted...and then removed the very bloom that was going to win Queen at the next show!

In general, I find that the best way to get a bloom to the show is to cut a stem when the bud is maybe only a third of the way open, usually around Thursday before a Saturday show. I've been known to cut as early as Monday if I know the rose stands up well to refrigeration. But whenever you cut the bloom, be sure to re-cut the stem under water right away, and let it stand in a bucket of water for about an hour before refrigerating it. Protect the bloom with a plastic transport cone or tube, or by slipping a Styrofoam cup or bowl around it. If you cut and refrigerated early, you may need to set the

bloom out for a day or so in a preservative solution that encourages continued growth.

Once you arrive at the show and greet all your friends and claim a workspace and gather all the necessary glassware, set all your show blooms out – one per vase – to inspect them, select the best one(s), and do your grooming.

As you prepare each rose or spray, remember what you learned when you read *The Handbook for Judging Roses* about what the judges will be looking for. Inspect the center to see if it comes to a nice high point (exhibition form entries). Look straight *down* on the bloom to see if it presents a circular outline. Look straight *across* at the bloom to see if it presents a triangular outline, with the outer petals parallel to the floor. For sprays, check to see if all the blooms present a nice, circular, domed appearance. If you're entering a fully open bloom, make sure it's circular in shape and that the stamens are fully exposed and as fresh and colorful as possible.

Grooming techniques are a whole other topic, which I'll save for another time. Until then, if you are a novice exhibitor, don't hesitate to ask for the advice, help, or opinion of another exhibitor. Unless we're pressing hard against the entry cutoff time, we're glad to assist you! Better yet, continue to bring your best blooms to the meeting and ask your questions there.

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TWO: Summer Blues

Soon after the Tampa rose show is over, the bitten exhibitor is still thinking about exhibiting. After all, the Fall shows are coming soon! Come October, we'll be right back at it.

For some of us (you know who I am), it's a chance to regroup and figure out what went wrong during the Spring exhibit season. For others, it's a chance to figure out where to put all the great prizes you won! (And you know who you are, too.) Personally, I think my biggest problem this season was timing: out of nearly 70 bushes, I was only able to find 7 blooms ready to enter at one show, and 12 good enough to enter at the Tampa show. Ordinarily I'd prefer to go to the shows with about 30!

Now as you probably know, one of the reasons we don't have rose shows in central Florida in the summertime is that it's just too hot around here. Even if you, the rose grower, don't mind the heat, your roses do. Since the daytime AND nighttime temperatures are so warm, and the heat of the sun and the pounding of the summer storms are so stressful, the blooms never really have a chance to grow much before they burst open and fade. We definitely have smaller blooms in summer, and they just don't last as long. It would frankly be embarrassing to try to show these flowers.

One good thing about the summer heat though...the thrips that ruined you light-colored blooms in the spring (almost) magically disappear. You should be able to stop using most of your insecticides during the summer...maybe just a little *Merit* from time-to-time to keep the aphids at bay.

This really is the time to start preparing for your Fall exhibits. Water, of course, is critical to keeping the plants strong and healthy, and enough fertilizer to ensure that rain storms don't have the effect of starving your bushes by leaching all the nutrients away. Most important, perhaps is the active cultivation of a bountiful crop of leaves on each bush. That's right! LEAVES. Healthy, green ones. These are the structures that make the food that the plants need to survive and grow. They also provide shade for the stems and roots, where energy is stored. To conserve leaves, the recommended horticultural practice in Florida is to cut summer flowers with short stems, and deadhead only down to the first set of leaves. Then, in September, you can start pruning for the October rose shows and encourage the long, elegant canes to grow again.

Meanwhile, back at the grooming kit...

Summer is also a good time to restock your grooming kit, particularly if the Spring shows used a lot of your supplies. Throw out those nasty old cotton swabs and lay in a fresh supply. Sharpen your pencils, put return address labels on your supply of entry tags, replenish your rubber bands, and throw in another small brush or two.

Dump the scrap out of your bag of wedging Styrofoam and cut some new wedges. It takes very little time to prepare a hundred or more if you know how. Start with a 1-inch sheet of green Styrofoam and slice off a strip about a half-inch thick. Lay it flat and then make diagonal cuts, back and forth, to produce little 4-sided trapezoid shapes that have top and bottom edges that are alternately 1-inch and 3/8-inch

wide. I've seen a lot of exhibitors use a lot of wedges, but this design is the best. Once you have the shape figured out, you can vary the size to fit the vases that you expect to be using in the shows: bud vases, mini vases, and collection vases.

As I've stressed before, it's important for an exhibitor to *know* the characteristics of the roses you want to show. Summer is a great time to experiment with any new roses that you planted earlier this year. Learn how well they refrigerate, hold, and open. Learn how quickly the bushes repeat. Take notes! Remember, of course, that summer roses may not look the same, color-wise and shape-wise, as they do during cooler weather.

Above all, don't forget how much fun exhibiting can be. And how rewarding, too! At the Tampa Rose Society, the rose show is our best way of attracting new members...so we're saddened when old friends decide to quit the Queen chase, and we're always eager to welcome new exhibitors to make the shows bigger and better.

Next time I'll cover stem length and other specific show tips.

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THREE: Subjective Judgment

Pretend it's September and exhibition season starts next month. Are you ready to make some decisions?

The fall show season is arguably the best because your plants are well developed with many fresh new canes, the weather is getting a little cooler so your flowers are getting bigger, and many of the springtime pests are gone. But to get ready for that first show, you need to check the calendar and gauge the best time to prune your bushes for production of exhibition blooms.

The conscientious exhibitor makes an effort all summer long to grow as many leaves as possible, and to keep them healthy. This often means that you deadhead only the spent blooms, and you cut short stems for bouquets. This, in turn, means that unless you spend a lot of time in your garden thumb-pruning all the new apical growth, your plants may well be eight feet tall by now, with a lot of spindly stems. So to encourage exhibition style stems, you've got to sacrifice some of those leaves and prune back to the stems that will support thick, strong canes.

So when do you cut? I recommend either one (6 weeks) or two (12 weeks) bloom cycles before the primary show(s) you want to attend. (Summer storms may not give you the luxury of choice, however!) It's a subjective judgment that depends on the health and vigor of your garden.

The next important cutting is done in the days and hours right before a show. Most exhibitors will attempt to cut the longest stems possible when they find a suitable bloom. That's generally a good idea, but one that has to be tempered with pragmatism. Some practical considerations that may lead you to limit then length of the stem include the amount of room you have in your storage cooler or refrigerator, or the length of the protective tubes or cones that you use to get your roses to the show. You may also want to consider leaving enough of the stem on the bush to become a starting cane for the next stems.

I generally recommend that you limit the stems that you cut to about 22-24 inches. More than that is usually overkill, unless you have a truly giant bloom to exhibit. (Northern blooms are typically larger than our Florida blooms, so the suggestion is just that...a suggestion!) Stems should obviously be strong, straight, and healthy. Make every effort to save and protect all the leaves and leaflets, and try not to damage or remove any of the prickles. At least the bottom two inches will be in the exhibition vase, so it is safe to strip this area.

When the judges look at your exhibits, they are supposed to focus their attention on the bloom, since that's where most of the "points" are awarded. The foliage and stem are secondary. But the one aspect of judging that always has an impact on a judge's first impression is the subjective area of "proportion and balance."

No judge goes about the tables with a tape measure or a ruler to determine if the stem length is appropriate for the size of the bloom, so you don't need to do that either in the preparation area. Instead, you and the judges must apply the same subjective judgment to determine the optimum stem

length for your rose. It's simply a case of determining what stem length is the most aesthetically pleasing; that is, "What looks right?" There is, however, a rule of thumb that you can apply.

Normally, the optimum length of the stem should be about seven times the height of the bloom. Some exhibitors and judges describe this as "at least five times," but I see this as a minimum for even entering a bloom. Let's consider an exhibition stage bloom with its bottom row of petals parallel to the floor and the center of the bloom in a high, tight spiral. Around here, this queen-of-show bloom is often about 2-1/2 to 3 inches tall. That means that it should have a stem underneath it that is about 21 inches long. (If you had a 5 to 1 ratio the stem would only be 15 inches long, and the presentation just wouldn't look right.) For miniatures, a 1-inch bloom would need about a 7-inch stem.

If you happen to be exhibiting a bloom that doesn't have a high, tight center (such as a fully open bloom) the bloom height will be shorter, so the stem could also be a little shorter, but not much! Balance and proportion must also consider the overall "size" of the bloom, and a fully open bloom can be quite large. In the end, it all comes down to a subjective judgment as to what just looks best!

When it comes time to prop the stem up in its vase, make sure the stem is deep enough in the vase to maintain contact with the water. The wedging material used to make the stem stand straight can often be hidden by the bottom leaf. Adjust the height of the stem until it looks right to you, and then get a second opinion if you can. Good luck!

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FOUR: In Search of Perfection

The difference between “good enough” and “close to perfect” can be pretty significant at a rose show. As an exhibitor, you can win some blue ribbons with “good enough” but you’ll never win an honest queen of show with roses that are only “good enough”. So what kind of exhibitor are you? And what kind of exhibitor would you like to be?

Those questions are best answered after considering *why* you became an exhibitor in the first place. Although there may be many reasons, I think they boil down to two basic motivations: 1) You want to compete and win! 2) You want to provide a show of beauty for the public.

In the rose society, we often say that the “official” reason we have rose shows is to encourage more people to join the rose society so they can learn to grow better roses. If that were the only reason, then each exhibitor would bring a lot more roses and make a lot more entries, with little regard for the awards table. We wouldn’t be so particular about displaying roses that we know in advance will only win red, yellow, and white ribbons...or no ribbons at all.

But most of the exhibitors I know have a tremendous amount of pride in the roses they show. If they don’t think an exhibit has blue ribbon potential, then it doesn’t even get brought to the show. And roses that develop some flaw on the way to the show or reveal some imperfection when brought into the daylight never make it to the exhibit hall. These are the folks who provide the most spectacular roses for the “sale buckets” when the entry period closes!

Among this group of exhibitors are the people whom other exhibitors call the “hardware hunters.” If an exhibit isn’t queen quality, they won’t even bother with it. Some years ago we had one exhibitor who typically only brought two or three roses to a show...and very often won the queen or king of show. His roses were truly close to perfect, but he contributed very little to the overall success of the rose shows he attended. Imagine a show where 20 or so exhibitors each showed up with only 2 roses each!

But you can’t fault someone for doing his or her best when a show is clearly a contest, as well. It’s a matter of pride to make each entry look spectacular, and you can’t do that with mediocre roses. The people that take the time and make the effort to show great stuff deserve to win the awards.

How is that done? By striving to present the judges with “perfect” specimens!

When I began exhibiting, the first thing I did was to contact the ARS and order my own copy of the *Handbook for Judging Roses*. I had to know what the judges were looking for in their quest for perfection on the show tables, and learn the book definition of “perfect.” By the end of my first full year as an exhibitor, I had three queens in ten shows! (My production has fallen off somewhat since that hot start!)

So what is perfection in a hybrid tea rose? Ultimately, the contest for queen between the six best roses comes down to a set of tiebreakers. All six are “good enough” to stand in the royal court, but all but one will be judged “runners-up” to the winner.

Is every petal edge perfect? Judicious trimming may be needed to achieve something that looks perfect. Are the petals sunburned or water spotted? Not on the winner! Does the center come to a truly sharp point, or does it have a tiny hole in it? Go back to the textbook definition of “high pointed center” and decide. Is the arrangement of the petals truly symmetrical? All it takes is one out-of-place petal to ruin perfection.

There’s a controversy among some of our well-known exhibitors as to the relative value of spending time to polish each leaflet after removing all spray residue. If your goal is just to win a blue ribbon, then I agree that this might not be important. But if you have a high level of confidence that your rose will be among the top six in the final judging, then you want to win that leaf perfection tiebreaker.

If you want to be a consistent winner, then you’ve got to strive for perfection and leave “good enough” for exhibitors more concerned with quantity, not quality. Sometimes, it’s a tough choice.

I like to shoot for a compromise: bring 30, enter 20, win with 2 or 3, and thrill to the public’s enjoyment of all the “also ran” entries on the show tables. Good luck!

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FIVE: Good Grooming

As they say on Broadway, “It’s show time!” Fall in Florida is the time when we have our best exhibition quality roses. But as I’ve pointed out before, you can’t “make a silk purse out of a sow’s ear” as another old saying goes. You have to start with great roses and then provide a bit of touch-up.

Grooming a rose for show is a lot like having an expensive new car “detailed” to make it look as good as it can possibly look, even though it probably looks better than most other cars before you even start the process. With roses, however, there are a few more limitations.

Be firm, but be gentle. One of central Florida’s most renowned exhibitors saw me fussing with the petals of a rose one day, as I tried to influence the symmetry of the bloom. She laughed and said, “Here, let me show you how to do that.” She then took my delicate bloom and proceeded to squeeze the center of the flower unmercifully! When she was done, the center was still high and pointed, the bud was rounded, the flower was symmetrical, and the petals were more relaxed. Seems that a good massage was just what was needed!

Most of the time, however, you can manipulate petals by massaging them individually with cotton swabs, paintbrushes, or makeup brushes. I once watched one of the best exhibitors in the country get a petal to curl properly by stroking it with a fluffy makeup brush for 30 minutes. Swabs and rough-edged cereal balls are two of the most popular tools for “encouraging” a bloom to move its petals to a particular position. Simply insert them where you want to apply some pressure, then wait for the rose to respond – although that may take a few hours.

Remove but don’t add. Every exhibitor should know this rule. It’s another version of the philosophy that “less is more.” Under this rule, we carefully take our cuticle scissors to the delicate edges of the petals to remove minor shape or color defects. Thrips, thorns, or careless handling may have caused these defects, and they should be trimmed away carefully with sharp tools and steady hands. But be very careful not to change the overall shape of the petal, or its size relative to the petals around it.

Sometimes it’s also necessary to remove entire petals, or even a whole row of petals. This is done in cases where a rose with a lot of petals may have a first row that has fallen well past the horizontal plane. (The relatively new rose “Mavrik” is a great example.) It may also be necessary to remove the non-standard colors that often appear in the guard petals, or in a petal marked by a color fault (like an unexpected white streak in the middle of a red petal – Mister Lincoln is famous for them). Lastly, we often need to remove a few small petals or petaloids from the center of a fully-open bloom exhibit where the stamens must stand out and look very fresh.

Remove distracting elements. While the exhibitor should be mindful of the fact that the condition and appearance of the foliage is only a minor factor in the judge’s scoring system, first impressions do count! You may have a beautiful rose with marvelous color and form, but the whole

exhibit may be discounted if the foliage is badly torn or insect damaged. It’s a simple task to remove such distractions with a pair of scissors (like pinking shears) that leave a regular serrated edge. Your job is to find one or more pairs that leave edges like the edges nature puts into various roses. It doesn’t have to be perfect, just enough so that a torn leaf doesn’t immediately jump out at a judge’s eye. Again, be sure that your trimming doesn’t ruin the general shape or size of the leaf.

Sometimes a leaflet just has a hole in it that you can’t fix. Since it is absolutely forbidden to add a “patch” to the leaflet to cover the hole, you must either live with it, or try to hide it behind another leaf. In any case, you do not want to remove an entire leaflet, for that would be adding additional distraction to your exhibit.

Arcane tiebreakers. Here’s a tip that one of my early mentors gave me: don’t distract the judges with carelessly hung entry tags! Admittedly, this is a pretty minor point, but next time you’re at a show, look at all the entries on the table and observe how the tags are hung. Just as some people take pride in their posture and some slouch casually when relaxed, the way the tag hangs can leave an impression on the observer. A tag that hangs there on a rubber band that doesn’t hold tight to the neck of the vase may indicate a casually prepared rose. Entries with tags that are precisely positioned make the judges’ job easier and show the exhibitor’s pride in his or her exhibits.

Good luck!

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SIX: No Excuses

Shortly after I started my rose garden – and membership in our local rose society – I heard a senior consulting rosarian tell a young exhibitor something important. I've remembered the words every time I look at my garden or prepare for a rose show: *"Your roses really don't care what your excuse is for not taking proper care of them."*

The meaning, of course, is that your roses will reward you with the same measure of excellence that you provide them. If you take it easy, you'll have an average garden. If you work hard, your roses will show it. It stands to reason that someone who spends 20 hours a week in the garden will have better roses than someone who spends only 2 hours.

When you think about it, you have to do a lot of things to grow and show top quality roses. But face it, who has the time, energy, and ambition to spend all their time in the garden? (I think the mental health people call that an "obsession"!) So we take shortcuts and make allowances to fit the roses into our schedules.

Face it, reality sometimes gets in the way. Maybe you skip a Saturday spraying because it just rained, or you only have one opportunity to mist your buds with Orthene before a show. The roses don't care *why* you didn't spray...only that you didn't spray. If you work from dawn to dusk at a regular job, then come home to relax and don't have time to hand-water the roses every day before a show, your roses won't be as good as someone who made the time or made arrangements for watering. Your roses won't care *why* you didn't water them...only that you didn't do it.

Believe me, I've got a LOT of excuses for the many imperfections in my garden. Nevertheless, I still have all those imperfections. The roses tolerate no excuses, even my best ones!

So now that it's a new year, with resolutions fresh in mind, it's time for exhibitors to make one more resolution for the upcoming exhibition year: "No excuses!"

These are the things you know that you need to attend to: Soil sample and pH test; complete mid-winter smorgasbord of organics: pruning done on time with dormant spray right away: plenty of water on a regular basis: frequent feeding: regular spraying: insecticides as needed for thrips and other pests: protect your beds from encroaching tree roots; prune back nearby trees to allow maximum sunshine to reach the roses.

And that's just the list of things that you need to think about as regular maintenance. There's another list of things to do as you prepare your roses for upcoming shows: Daily watering; increased spraying for thrips; mechanical stem straightening and bloom guarding; disbudding; and foliar feeding.

Yes, there certainly is a lot to do to prepare your garden and your roses for a successful show! Getting your roses to the awards table involves so much more than good grooming techniques on the day of the show. But once you've been "bitten by the exhibition bug" you know how important these things are, and you're willing to do as many

of them as possible in the time you have available. No excuses...the roses just don't care.

Are you getting ready to shovel prune the roses that didn't produce winners for you last year? Sentimental attachments aside, as a serious exhibitor you know you should. Putting all that effort into roses that have little chance of ever reaching the awards table is counterproductive.

This is where rosarians splinter into several guiding philosophies about why we grow the roses we do. There has to be some room for sentiment! Personally, I grow lots of roses only because they're pretty or they smell fantastic, even though I know it would be a waste of time to take them to a show. (I know...that's an excuse for not winning more!)

Since late January is the recommended time for major pruning in central Florida, it may be important to review your purpose for pruning. As I've noted in other forums, how you prune should be dictated by your reason for growing roses in the first place. An exhibition garden is different from a casual garden, as the exhibitor's goal is long, strong stems and large, well-formed flowers. The casual gardener may be interested in quantity rather than quality – a garden that is pleasing to the eye.

The exhibitor may prune a bush more severely than others because he knows a bush that can concentrate its energy in fewer canes will generally produce more vigorous stems and flowers. For that reason, we usually restrict our exhibition bushes to 3 – 5 canes that are never more than a few years old. We remove stems aimed toward the center of the bush and we eliminate canes that are positioned to damage other canes or stems. It's a way to eliminate one more excuse!

Good luck!

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SEVEN: What Are They Looking For?

Is the best way to get started as an exhibitor to attend as many shows as you can as a spectator, then jump right in? Well, that may work...but it may not work well.

Rather, the best way to get into exhibiting is the way of careful preparation. As with most activities, the most essential element for a potential rose exhibitor is knowledge. If you want to put winners on the awards table, you need to know what the judges are going to be looking for when they get to your exhibit.

Start by contacting the book store at the American Rose Society and ordering a copy of their publication, *Handbook for Judging Roses*. It's a treasure trove of "secrets" for exhibitors because it tells you everything you need to know to win! Actually, its purpose is to tell judges what to look for, but the wise exhibitor will always find a way to make his or her roses look just that way.

In the United States, the ideal exhibition rose is a hybrid tea with a high, pointed center. (This is not necessarily the case in other countries, such as Australia, where they look for more decorative structures.) When viewed from the side, the rose will present a relatively triangular shape, with the outermost petals perpendicular to the ground and the tightly wound center forming the top point. When viewed from above, the rose should have the most circular shape possible, with good symmetry.

That's the heart of the matter, but there are a lot more nuances that go into selecting the "most perfect" rose. The judges have a point system that they can use to quantify the merits of an exhibit, although in practice, they don't actually tally points during the judging process. If you look at the "Rules for Exhibitors" page in the show schedule, you'll see that *Form* is the most important element, worth about 25 percent of the judge's consideration. *Color* is worth another 20 percent, as is the quality of the *Stem & Foliage*. A factor called *Substance* is worth 15 percent, followed up by *Balance & Proportion* and the *Size* of the rose at 10 percent each.

As the judges compare one rose to another, and to the best rose of the variety that they can remember ever seeing, they weigh each of the factors to select the freshest rose with the purest color, the lushest foliage, and the greatest size. (All things being equal, a bigger rose will beat a smaller rose every time!) Freshness may be measured by the stiffness (substance) of the petals. Colors should show no evidence of unusual sunburning, or refrigeration, or the effects of water. Which rose has been punctured or torn by nearby prickles, or chewed on by an insect? Did the exhibitor realize that a big rose on a short or skinny stem just looks silly?

So many things to know! That's why you need to learn how to prepare a rose to show the judges what they're looking for in their quest for perfection. But the *Handbook* is not the only way to get the inside scoop on judges' preferences. How would you like to be a "fly on the wall" as a team of judges discussed the merits of a particular exhibit?

This is just as easily done as it is said! Try to get as much experience as possible working as a clerk during the judging period. Clerks are assigned to each team of judges and usually get to hear every word of the deliberations.

When you hear a particular criticism, and then look at the rose and see it, you can take that knowledge with you for the next time you exhibit...and avoid that mistake.

Next time we'll go over the tips and tricks needed to successfully exhibit roses other than hybrid teas.

Good luck!

Bitten by the Exhibition Bug

...a series by Jeff Mogilewicz consulting rosarian

EIGHT: What to Show – How to Show It

In the previous article we reviewed the importance of knowing what the judges want to see in competition, and then tailoring our exhibits to give them just what they're looking for. The answers are all contained in the ARS publication, *Handbook for Judging Roses*. If you consider yourself a serious exhibitor, or if you're a novice exhibitor who'd like to be taken seriously, then you need a copy of the *Handbook*.

But exhibiting is so much more than just the hybrid tea roses that we covered last month. Most shows have separate categories for floribundas, climbers, shrub roses, old garden roses, and miniatures, either as one bloom per stem exhibits or as multiple bloom sprays. And to round things out even further, there are collections of roses and special exhibits featuring apparatus such as boxes, bowls, and picture frames.

The show schedule describes the categories, and the general rules for the show (also published in the schedule) provide additional detail. As the *exhibitor*, it's your responsibility to comply with all the published guidance. But as a *competitor*, you turn again to the *Handbook* for the best guidance about what the judges will be looking for.

In general, one-bloom miniatures follow the same rules as their larger cousins, the HTs and grandifloras. High, pointed centers with good color and symmetry, on a stem that is the right size for the bloom, with undamaged foliage.

If you wish to exhibit roses with multiple blooms, the goals change only slightly. Sprays (defined as two or more blooms on a single main stem) still have to demonstrate "exhibition quality" blooms, each meeting the criteria applied to one-bloom exhibits. However, the more buds, blooms, and open flowers you have on the stem, the more leeway the judges can provide. After all, it is rare for all the buds on a spray to open at exactly the same time, so your exhibit is likely to show a range of development. The important thing is that the exhibit qualifies for its category by having *two or more* flowers at their most perfect stage of beauty.

If your exhibit has fully open blooms that have started to dry out around the edges, or whose stamens look dark and dry, the judges will find fault. Such flowers should be cut out of the exhibit. On the other hand, if the exhibit has fully open flowers that are still very fresh looking, full of substance and good color, the judges will find advantage. Buds in any stage of development are also welcomed, but there should not be a disproportional ratio of buds to blooms.

The more exhibition quality flowers in a spray, the better, but now there's another issue to consider. A well-populated spray must also be symmetrical in the distribution and arrangement of the blooms. When viewed from above, the ideal spray has a nearly circular arrangement, or at least oval. When viewed from the side, the spray should present a domed appearance, with the central flowers higher than those at the edges. People often make the "more is always better" mistake by failing to remove flowering clusters that originate and terminate below the main body of blooms. Remember, symmetry in a spray is as important as balance and proportion.

Old garden roses, and many shrubs such as the David Austin roses, rarely have the high pointed form that we demand of our hybrid teas and minis. Instead, their blooms may be quartered, cup shaped, ruffled, or otherwise decorative. Whatever the shape of the individual bloom, the undamaged petals should be full of substance and the stamens should be fresh. The fully formed flowers (at least two!) should lend themselves to a dome shaped arrangement.

I've never seen a fistfight between our genteel judges, but I have seen some "animated discussions" about the way to exhibit floribunda roses with a small petal count! The point of contention stems from the general rule that says that the exhibition rose should be shown at "its most perfect phase of beauty." This normally means a point where the rose is one-half to two-thirds open. But what if the rose in question is a single (12 petals or less) or one that is considered most beautiful when it is fully opened? When Angel Face, for example, is used in a floribunda painter's palette, should it be pointed or fully open? This is only a question because this particular rose actually has a pointed exhibition form, and the consensus is that this is its most perfect form. It doesn't really match well with other roses that never have this form.

Which brings me to the point of matching flowers in any sort of collection. Whether its an English box or a painter's palette, or a collection in a vase, your exhibition roses should match each other in size, form, color, stem size, and general shape; for exhibits featuring roses of mixed colors, the colors should compliment each other.

Do everything right, and the judges will be complimenting you! Good luck!

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NINE: Now For the Fun Part

Since the beginning, this column has focused almost exclusively on providing artistic and technical advice to the beginning and intermediate level exhibitor. While this column is not necessarily a tool for recruiting new exhibitors, I've hoped to develop more general interest in exhibiting by telling you a lot of the *what* and *how* needed to participate and win at a local rose show.

This time I want to focus on *fun*. Yes, it does take a lot of hard work and technical know-how to be a successful rose exhibitor, but it's a lot of fun, too, and a great chance to socialize with like-minded people. So now, as we enter the exhibition season in central Florida, let the good times roll!

We're fortunate to have so many local shows so near to us. I spoke to some exhibitors from New York State a few years ago during the Orlando National show. They told me that they normally had only two or three local shows a year available to them! They couldn't believe I had done 10 shows the previous year. It's so easy to get started.

Let me state right here that many exhibitors may strike you as just plain nuts! How crazy is it to get up on a Saturday morning, early enough to drive one or two hours to arrive at a show site by 6:00 or 6:30 in the morning? Several exhibitors that I know refer to this as "the silly season." Another married couple has an understanding that nothing they say to each other at a rose show can be held against them when they get home. And I know another couple that left their central Florida home at 1:00 A.M. to enter the shows at both Jacksonville AND Gainesville on the same morning! I personally have driven two and a half hours through a major windstorm to get to a show (But I won Queen, so that made it okay!)

Then there's the team that shows up and uses an electric toothbrush to polish foliage, and the exhibitor who brings so many roses to a show that her frantic preparation almost *never* ends before the deadline. And I think you may already have heard about the exhibitor's spouse who had a wild idea one day and encouraged a half dozen other exhibitors to snip the blooms off otherwise attractive stems and foliage as a practical joke on the judges! (The famous "Emperor's New Rose" prank.)

That's some of the craziness. Then there's the irony that occurs when luck defies logic. Like when a couple entered their first show ever and won Queen with a rose that's normally impossible to get to a show in prime condition. Or when an exhibitor known for hybrid teas only went to a District level show with exactly one mini rose – and won Mini Queen, beating mini experts who had come with as many as 300 specimens. Or the really top-level exhibitor who put all his roses in a refrigerated carrier and got to the show to find them all *frozen*!

Some of the best times are had when we go to shows hosted by other rose societies. With little to do between the entry deadline and the time that the judges complete their work and open the show to the public, the exhibitors usually party over brunch. We've been known to walk into a restaurant and ask for "a table for 19, please." (That gets 'em excited!)

And if you leave a bouquet of roses for the server, the smiles last all day.

Lest you think that the regular exhibitors are immune from mistakes – they're not! All the "top guns" have been embarrassed a time or two, providing the rest of us with a chuckle. For instance, the time my entry was disqualified because I left cereal balls in between the petals of a rose I had been coaxing into shape, even though I had been taught specifically to check for that. My mentor chastised me for that, then turned around a couple shows later and got caught in the same mistake! (Yes, we teased him a lot.) Or how about the veteran exhibitor who managed to have an old fashioned bouquet disqualified, show after show after show, because the judges thought that one of the 20 or so roses in the arrangement was misnamed. (Sometimes they were right, sometimes not, but the string of DQs went on!)

But the most fun of all comes when you finally get to see the results of your efforts: when you come back from brunch to find one or more of your exhibits on the awards table. I hope you'll try it.

Good luck!

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TEN: Pitfalls

When you stop and think about all the little things that can go wrong as you try to get your roses from the garden to the awards table, you might wonder how anybody does it. But all our successful exhibitors show you that it can be done! It just takes a lot of experience and a little bit of luck.

I say experience because nobody gets to be a very successful exhibitor unless they've had the opportunity to make some mistakes, and to learn from them. As you prepare your roses for exhibit, you have to balance your expected workload with your time and the environment. It does no good to bring more roses than you have time to groom, and it does no good to try to groom your roses in the dark.

On more than one occasion I've arrived at a show before daylight, only to find that the exhibitors' preparation area was outdoors, with only a few feeble bulbs between workstations. The people who got there early enough to survey the area and pick the best spots did better than those who took what was left when they arrived at dawn. My partner and I got a spot on the east side of the place, where we got the benefit of the sunrise. At another outdoor venue, it was dark and cool when we arrived, but by the time the last entries were being prepared, the sun was up and reflecting off all the bright concrete surfaces, wilting the roses before we could get them inside. The early birds got the spots that stayed shady.

Shopping malls have always been good about opening up to let us inside, but it's often a couple of hours into the preparation time before someone shows up to turn on enough lights to be helpful. At one location, conditions were fairly good until the sun rose enough to start glaring through a huge, tall window, making it absolutely miserable for those at the east end of the preparation area.

The lesson here: arrive early and choose your work area carefully, with an eye toward the available light! But light isn't the only consideration. Find out where the entry table is to be set up, then choose a work area that is close to you, but out of the traffic pattern where everyone else is funneling through, and where you don't have to climb past other exhibitors while juggling your vases and bowls.

Most show committees set up the exhibitors' work area the night before the show, putting water-filled glassware on each of the work tables, plus another supply of vases and such in a central location. Depending on the number and type of roses that you normally bring to a show, you may find that there is too much workspace lost to all the glassware, or that your roses outnumber the containers and you need to collect quite a few more! Another good reason to get to the show early.

Experience has taught me that all the effort that you put into protecting your roses between the garden and the parking lot is worth little if you're not really careful in getting your roses from the parking lot to the preparation area. We tend to take shortcuts to avoid making multiple trips, like rolling a wheeled container over a rough, bumpy surface and ruining our delicate buds with all the vibration.

It *almost* (but not quite) goes without saying that even your entry tags deserve some careful consideration. Novice exhibitors learn quickly that they need to obtain entry tags for the *next* show at the current show, so that they can get them ready early. At the very least, apply your address labels or stamps at home, and at best, fill in the rose names before the show. Be sure to check the show schedule to put the right classification on the tag, and refer to an ARS publication for correct spelling of the rose name.

In previous columns we've covered the importance of cutting your roses at the right time and conditioning them. Now we need to look at some of the steps that are useful in protecting the buds and blooms from each other and from you. There are tubes, cones, cups, and other ingenious ways that can be used to prevent thorns from tearing adjacent leaves and flowers. Whatever method you choose, be sure to use it! And if you put your roses into a frost-free refrigerator, be aware of the tendency of the roses to dry out and lose substance unless you keep them covered.

It's often hard to predict how warm or cool the air will be in the preparation area, so your memory is your best ally from year to year. You may need to make some early decisions about finding a warm, sunny spot to coax those tight buds open, or determine to limit your rose grooming in a warm room. I've taken some beautiful, tight *Pristines* into a prep area, only to have to enter them as open blooms!

One last word if you hope to improve your standing as an exhibitor: get yourself a copy of Bob Martin's book, *Showing Good Roses*, and read it!

Good luck!