

Selecting and Preparing Iris Stalks for a Show

by Vince Lewonski

We would like to encourage everyone to bring some stalks to an iris show, even if you have never done so before. Here are some tips for selecting and preparing iris stalks for a show.

STALK SELECTION

This may be the most critical part. How do you decide what looks good enough to take to a show? Start looking at your garden several days beforehand to see which stalks appear to have potential. If a stalk looks like it will have fresh flowers open by show day and the branching and spacing look good, you may want to mark it with a piece of colored yarn. Some people cut their stalks the night before the show, but I wait until the morning of the show so that I can pick ones which have just opened. If bad weather threatens, however, you may want to cut the stalks and bring them inside ahead of time.

The flowers should have NO faults. This is hard to find, and even harder still to get those perfect flowers to the show. Bent petals, bruised petals, holes from aphids, extra petals, petals pointing in strange directions, and spider webs all detract from the flower's beauty. Tears in the petal are okay as long as they are naturally occurring, and do not deform the petal. Having multiple flowers open is a plus, but not a requirement. You are better off having a stalk with one nice flower than several flowers that are starting to shrivel, have tears, or display other faults. And you want flowers that will look good at the time the judges view them, not just when you see them hours before the show.

If the stalk is leaning badly, don't bother to cut it. You won't be able to get it to stand up straight in the bottle, and the flowers will tend to be pointing outwards. If you have a leaning stalk that you think has the potential to be a good show stalk, make sure that you stake it a couple days before the show. This will give the flowers time to change their alignment so that they again are pointing upwards.

If the iris has multiple branches, they should all be in the same plane. Even having several nice open flowers might not be enough if the branches are all pointed in different directions. The stalk selected should be free or nearly free of leaf spot. Some trimming to eliminate this is allowed, but if extensive and obvious, it will be penalized by the judges.

If at all possible, choose a stalk that has the terminal bud open. If there are multiple flowers open, they should all be the same size. Secondary buds from the same socket tend to be smaller. The spacing should be well away from the stalk. You don't want any flower to be rubbing up against the stalk or against another flower. The flowers should be nearly vertical. Pointed in towards the stalk is known as "towing in", and pointed out away from the stalk is known as "towing out". Both of these are faults, and will be penalized. You can help the flowers that are "towing in" or have a petal rubbing up against the

stalk by wedging a piece of cotton or cork between the branch and the stalk. This may be enough to keep it in that position by show time. Just don't forget to take out your wedge when you get to the show!

If the cultivar is a space-ager, make sure that all flowers are uniform. Space-agers tend to have some beards with horns, some with flounces, and some with just a regular beard. If it is supposed to have horns, it may be penalized if only some petals have horns and others do not.

Label the irises at home as you cut them so there won't be any memory lapses at the show. Do not write on the stalk. If this is noticed by the judges, they may take points off. Instead, write the names on a string tag, which you can loosely wrap around a branch until you are at the show.

GROOMING

Always cut the stalk as close to the ground as possible. You probably will not keep it that length, but you can always cut it shorter, while it is impossible to make it taller. Usually there is a leaf or two attached near its base. If they are going to end up crammed into the bottle neck and all bent over, take the leaves off! On the other hand, keep any leaf that is attached to the stalk above the bottle neck. Stick the stalk into the bottle and step back. Does the curve of the stalk at the base prevent it from standing straight? If so, you may want to trim off a few inches. Does it look top heavy because all the branching and flowers are well above the bottle? Again, you may want to trim the base of the stalk. Generally, the bottom branch should start a few inches above the neck of the bottle.

Often the bottom branch starts so low to the ground that when you put it in the bottle, the base of the stalk does not touch bottom of the bottle. This can make for an unstable stalk, but having the lower branch right up against the bottle neck makes it look unbalanced. Raise it up to a level that is pleasing, and wedge the stalk at that height by putting cotton or a cut section of stalk into the bottle neck. You can use this same method to hold the stalk in place even if it is all the way down. Make sure, though, that the cotton or pieces of stalk are not sticking up above the neck of the bottle.

If there is a branch where all of the buds have already bloomed, don't leave this branch attached. Carefully cut it off where it joins the stalk. This is hard to do and still make it look natural, so such stalks should be chosen only if they are otherwise excellent. Take off any spent blossoms, carefully cutting the ovary off at the base. Use a cotton ball to wipe off any fingerprints from the stalk. If there are cobwebs, insects, etc., take these off carefully. Sometimes the tip of the leaves can turn brown or have leaf spot. Use a scissors to carefully trim off the brown area, but maintain the graceful shape of the leaf, and cut off no more than ¼ inch. Never, ever cut the leaf straight across!

For the many iris shows, bottles are provided by the show committee to provide a uniform appearance. Other clubs may allow you to bring and use your own containers provided they meet the show requirements. Wine bottles tend to be forgiving for less than perfectly straight stalks. If there is too much of a curve at the bottom, however, no container will be able to compensate, and the whole stalk will be leaning. Often you can compensate by cutting the stalk a little shorter, eliminating the worst of the curve.

Occasionally you have a really thick stalk which is just too fat for the bottle. If possible, and if allowed by the show committee, try to find a wider necked bottle for this monster. These are very hard to find; therefore, you may have to trim the base of the stalk vertically to a size that you can cram into the bottle. Make sure that the cut portion is not exposed above the neck of the bottle, as this is unsightly.

For other than tall bearded, a smaller bottle can provide better proportion for a smaller, shorter iris. If this is permitted by the show committee, try a dessert wine bottle, a beer bottle or even a little wine

bottle such as those served on airplanes. In any case, the smaller bottle should be the same color as the other show bottles and, of course, the labels should be removed. The show committee, nevertheless, may require only one size of bottle for overall show uniformity.

Flowers that are partially opened at the time they are judged will be marked down, so if you have a bud that is only partly opened, you may be able to speed it along by putting warm (not hot) water in the bottle, keeping it in a warm room, judiciously using a blow dryer, and, as a last resort, carefully helping it along with your fingers.

TRANSPORTATION

The tricky part is getting the stalks to the show. I put the bottles in a box that once held a case of wine, making sure that they are spaced far enough apart so that no petals hit one another or any car parts. Generally, I fit about six stalks into a case-sized box. Newspapers can be used for wedging in the bottles.

Various other techniques are used. People make holders out of wood with PVC pipe mounted at an angle. There are caps or corks at the bottom of the pipes. Others use chicken wire in a 5-gallon pail with water in the bottom. Still others put the stalks in bottles, and then lay the bottles down with the stalks resting on the edge of a cardboard box with "V"s cut into it to hold the stalks in place.

For transporting, SUVs and minivans are ideal, as they have enough height that you don't have to worry about the stalks hitting the roof. Cars are more difficult, but you can put a box with the bottles on the floor, usually at an angle so that the stalks won't hit the windshield, seat back or roof. Usually, after you have struggled to get everything loaded, you vow to begin growing more of the shorter, more easily transported SDBs and IBs. Be very, very careful driving to the show. Corners and stop lights are not your friends!

SHOW TIME

Bring scissors, cotton balls, a sharp knife, Q-tips, a bottle with extra water and a pen. Make sure that you get to the show in plenty of time to unload (carefully!), make out tags, and do any last minute touchups or adjustments. Also remember that for DVIS shows, all your stalks need to be transferred and repositioned into the club bottles. There will be a lot of hustle and bustle as people try to get their stalks ready: bottles get positioned on the tables, carts filled with bottles roll across the floor, and others are designing arrangements in the corner. You don't want to be caught short of time. The show committee usually is quite strict as to the cut-off time, after which no further entries will be accepted. Usually it is around 10:00 a.m., but check the show schedule to be sure.

Every stalk entered needs a tag filled out. These are special tags with a bottom section that can be torn off after the judging. To fill out the tag, you will need to know the registered name of your iris, and the type (tall bearded, Siberian, etc.). You will also need to know the division and section codes for each stalk. These can be found in the show schedule. If you are not sure of the name of your iris, please don't guess. Label it a mystery iris or unknown, and enter it in the Unidentified Class. It is helpful to have a supply of return address labels handy, as it is quicker to put a label on than to fill out your name and address on a whole lot of tags. Make sure that you fill out both the top and bottom portions of the tag! The bottom portion is folded up and tucked in so that only the name of the iris and the class show. DVIS uses paper clips to attach the tags to the bottles. Some clubs use rubber bands, which go through the

hole in the top of the tag then around the bottle from the bottom so that it hangs around the bottle's neck.

You may only enter one stalk of each variety. A historic tall bearded stalk may be entered either in the Historic Class or the Tall Bearded Class, but not both. If entering the Collection Class (three or more stalks of the same cultivar), however, you may also enter the same cultivar as an individual stalk.

Your iris stalk is now ready to be placed by the show committee. Except for the people assisting the judges, no one is allowed in the area with the stalks once judging starts. Now is the time to get coffee and be nervous! After all judging is finished and the best stalks are moved to the head table, you may go into the show area and see how well your entries did. But even if you aren't on the head table, it's still a lot of fun to see all the different entries, and admire all the irises that you've never seen before. Write down the names of those you might want to buy. Talk to the other exhibitors and the judges to find out how you could have prepared your stalks better. And look forward to the next time!

