



Harvesting and Preparing Herbs for Exhibit

Herbs, botanically, are non-woody annuals, biennials, or perennial plants that die back to the ground each year. They are plants valued for their flavor, fragrance, and medicinal uses. Culinary herbs are often important ingredients in savory and sweet recipes. Freshly harvested herbs have distinct flavors and aromatic qualities.

There are many important guidelines when selecting and preparing fresh herbs for exhibit at fairs. Herbs exhibited at fairs are exhibited as fresh leaves and stems. They are not dried or processed in any way. Judges use several criteria to evaluate herbs. There are several things the exhibitor can do to meet these criteria to the highest level and receive top placings at the fair.

Judging Criteria for Herbs

When evaluating exhibits, judges look primarily at color, form, condition, uniformity, stage of development, true-to-type, and size.

CONDITION is an indication of how the exhibit has been handled.

- All herbs on exhibit must be in prime condition.
- The stem and leaves should be strong and in proportion to each other, as is typical for the species.
- Cleanliness is an important factor in evaluating the condition.
- Specimens must be free of blemishes that may be caused by insects, diseases, and mechanical injury.

UNIFORMITY & STAGES OF DEVELOPMENT

Uniformity gives insight into the ability of the exhibitor. It takes skill and knowledge to grow and exhibit multiple specimens that look identical.

- When two or more specimens are required for an exhibit, they must be as identical as possible in size, color, form, condition, and level of maturity.
- Herbs should be at the prime stage or maturity for use. Often the presence of flowers or seed pods (with the notable exception of dill and coriander) indicates over-maturity and is undesirable.

TRUE TO TYPE All herbs should be true-to-type, that is, typical of the cultivar or variety being exhibited. For example, a small, highly ruffled leaf is not typical of the Neapolitan (plain or flat) variety of parsley.

- Labeling is essential so the judge knows what to expect in the appearance of the herb. Labeling is especially important for unusual varieties or cultivars.
- All specimens in the exhibit should be of the same variety or cultivar. For example, an exhibit should not have both tricolor and purple sage. Mixing varieties is typically an automatic disqualification.

SIZE The size of an herb plant often indicates how a plant has been grown.

- The size of an herb specimen should be as large as the variety allows under proper growing conditions.
- The stem and foliage should be proportional to each other and typical for the variety/species.
- Large leaves are not desirable if they are in poor condition or form.

COLOR & FORM Good color is uniform, vivid, clear, bright, and typical of plant type.

- Foliage colors should not show muddiness or fading and should show no evidence of sunburn, scorching, bleaching, or uncharacteristic spotting.
- Form refers to a plant's ideal shape, structure, silhouette, size, and outline.
- The leaf and stem shape, texture, and size all contribute to the herb's form.
- Mechanical injury, insect and disease damage, or poor cultural practices can all cause poor form.



Planning & Exhibiting

Below are guidelines for preparing herbs for display. When prepared appropriately, the exhibit has the best color, form, condition, uniformity, stage of development, true-to-type, and size.

EXHIBITING Check the fair book for specific show guidelines. The quantities, stage of maturity, and other factors may differ from those listed in this publication.

Always follow the guidelines outlined in the fair book.

- Double-check all quantities before judging. An improper number of stems will lower your placing.
- Herbs are typically exhibited in clear or solid color vases, jars, or bottles. Always pick a vase that is stable (not easily tipped over). Colors, prints, lettering, and patterns distract from the exhibit. Occasionally the show organizers will provide vases to use. Refer to the fair book to know which classes have provided containers.
- Most shows have a process to allow you to change class the day of the show. Sometimes the herbs you intended to exhibit are not ready, but something else in your garden is. Switching an entry to a different class allows you to still be able to participate.

CLEANING Clean herbs are an important criterion for judging. Dirt detracts from the appearance.

- Brush dirt off with a soft-bristled brush, such as a small paintbrush or cloth.
- Do not wash herbs with water unless necessary. If needed, wash carefully with cool, clean water being particularly careful not to bruise or crease the leaves.
- Strip the lower leaves. No leaves should be below the water line.
- If one or two leaves are undesirable, carefully remove them. Stems stripped of too many leaves should not be exhibited.
- On the day of the show when preparing entries, select only specimens in prime condition.

HARVESTING Herbs should be fresh and in prime condition for use at the time of judging. Herbs should not be dried.

- Harvest only those herbs that exhibit the right stage of maturity, color, and size.
- Always use sharp pruners or scissors to make clean cuts when harvesting or trimming herbs.
- Harvest stems one day before the show, as most herbs will wilt immediately after harvest but will recover within 24 hours when placed in water.
- Cut herbs early in the morning or late afternoon.
- Cut more stems than your anticipated need, so you have options when preparing the exhibit.
- Cut stems as long as possible and trim them to uniform length later.
- Place stems in water up to lower leaves as soon as they are harvested.
- Leave in a cool, low-light, protected area until the show.
- Transport herbs carefully to prevent creasing, tearing, bending, or other damage.
 - Utilize a cooler to keep temperatures moderate and consistent.
 - Carefully wrap stems in light cloth or paper.
 - Carefully wedge specimens with soft materials in appropriate-sized boxes to prevent movement.
 - Secure vases to prevent tipping.
- Bring extra specimens as alternates to the show. If a specimen is damaged before the show, you will have a backup.

PLANNING When planting your garden in the spring, coordinate the planting to ensure herbs are ready for exhibiting during the fair. This may mean planting earlier or later than you typically would.

- Plant extra plants, rows, or varieties to ensure you have plenty to choose from the week of the fair.
- Properly label all plants so you know the variety when the fair arrives. Use labels, maps, or photos to keep accurate records.

LABELING Clearly label each specimen with its common name, scientific name, and variety/cultivar.

- The common name is the name commonly used for the plant and can vary by region, country, or language. Plants may have one or several commonly known names. The same common name may refer to two different plants.
- The scientific name (or botanical name) is the universal name given to a plant. Each plant has only one scientific name that consists of two words. The first word is always capitalized and identifies the plant's genus. The second word is the specific epithet and is not capitalized. The scientific name is underlined (when handwritten) or printed in italics (i.e. *Ocimum basilicum* or *Salvia officinalis*).
- Botanical variety, subspecies, or cultivar names should also be listed if applicable. Some cultivars of uncertain parentage are properly identified by genus and cultivar name and do not include a specific epithet (i.e. *Mentha* 'Margarita').
- When applicable, variety is particularly important as it lets the judges know what the herb should look like. For example, a leaf with varying green colors is typical for the 'Golden' variety of sage and would not lower your placing, but an uneven coloring of a 'Berggarten' variety of sage would since it should have solid colored leaves.
- Labeling makes the exhibit more educational. Viewers may want to know and possibly grow the varieties on display, as well as those that receive the top awards.



Guidelines for Preparing Herbs Exhibit

SCIENTIFIC AND COMMON NAME	NUMBER TO EXHIBIT	BEST STAGE OF MATURITY	FAULTS	PREPARATION
BASIL <i>Ocimum basilicum</i>	2 stems per bottle	Glossy, uniform, well-developed leaves with characteristics typical for the cultivar (color, shape, size).	Wilted, dirt or spray residue, flowering, discoloration, insect damage, bruised or creased leaves, no cultivar listed (if applicable).	Cut non-blooming stems with leaves 6 to 10 inches long. Rinse carefully with cool water (leaves bruise easily). Place in cool water and remove leaves below the water line.
DILL (LEAVES) <i>Anethum graveolens</i>	2 stems per bottle	Light green; ready to use.	Brown, wilted, dirty, insect damaged, in seed, or immature or overmature flower head (if present).	Cut stems 6 to 10 inches long with leaves. Specimens may have a flower/bloom, but it is not required. Place in cool water and remove leaves below the water line.
DILL (SEED) <i>Anethum graveolens</i>	2 heads	Mature, full head of seed that is still slightly greenish-brown; ready to use.	Immaturity, small size, over-mature, shattered seed heads, in flower.	Cut seed heads with 10- to 12-inch stems. Tie together with string near the lower end of stems and again just below seed heads.
CHIVES, GARLIC CHIVES <i>Allium schoenoprasum</i> , <i>Allium tuberosum</i>	5 leaves per bottle	Well-developed, uniform leaves in size and development.	Wilted, broken, or bent leaves, evidence of bent leaves (a crease), brown tips, soil, dust, or spray residue, insect damage, non-uniform length or width, flowering or in seed.	Cut leaves with scissors 6 to 10 inches long and trim to a uniform length. Remove dirt and dust if needed. Place cut ends in cool water.
CILANTRO <i>Coriandrum sativum</i>	3 stems per bottle	Fresh, tender, and uniform leaves on straight stems, uniform in size and development.	Wilted, yellowing leaves, flowering or in seed, over-mature, soil, dust, spray residue, or insect damage.	Cut leaves with scissors 4 to 6 inches long and trim to a uniform length. Place cut ends in cool water and remove leaves below the waterline. Wedge leaves with tissue or foam to prevent dropping down into the water.
FENNEL <i>Foeniculum vulgare</i> See Dill				
LAVENDER <i>Lavandula angustifolia</i> , <i>Lavandula stoechas</i>	3 stems per bottle	Fresh, tender, non-woody stems uniform in size and development (i.e., all stems in bloom or all stems not in bloom). Color is uniform and typical for species/variety.	Wilted, brown leaf edges, woody stems, stems at different stages of development (some flowering, some not), soil, dust, spray residue, or insect or mechanical damage.	Cut stems 6 to 8 inches long (longer if flowering) and trim them to a uniform length. Wash off dirt or dust, if needed. Place cut ends in cool water and remove leaves below the waterline.
MINT (PEPPERMINT, SPEARMINT, ETC.) <i>Mentha</i> species	2 stems per bottle	Fresh, tender, non-woody stems uniform in size and development. Flowers can be present but should be uniform in development. Color, shape, and texture are uniform and typical for species/variety.	Wilted, brown leaf edges, woody stems, stems at different stages of development (some flowering, some not), soil, dust, spray residue, or insect or mechanical damage.	Cut stems 6 to 10 inches long and trim to a uniform length. Wash off dirt and dust, if needed. Place cut ends in cool water and remove leaves below the waterline.
OREGANO <i>Origanum vulgare</i>	2 stems per bottle	Fresh stems uniform in size and development. Leaves are relatively the same size and color.	Wilted, brown leaf edges, bruised or creased/broken leaves, flowering, soil, dust, spray residue, or insect or mechanical damage.	Cut stems 4 to 8 inches long and trim to a uniform length. Carefully wash off dirt and dust, if needed (leaves bruise easily). Place cut ends in cool water and remove leaves below the waterline.

SCIENTIFIC AND COMMON NAME	NUMBER TO EXHIBIT	BEST STAGE OF MATURITY	FAULTS	PREPARATION
PARSLEY (FLAT-LEAF, CURLY, ITALIAN, ETC.) <i>Petroselinum crispum</i>	3 leaves per bottle	Fresh, tender, and uniform leaves on straight stems, uniform in size and development, leaf color, shape, texture, and size typical for cultivar.	Wilted, yellowing leaves, flowering or in seed, over-mature, soil, dust, spray residue, insect damage, or no cultivar listed (if applicable).	Cut leaves with scissors 4 to 6 inches long and trim to a uniform length. Clean gently in cool water, if needed. Place cut ends in cool water. Wedge leaves with tissue or foam to prevent dropping down into the water.
ROSEMARY <i>Salvia rosmarinus</i> (syn: <i>Rosmarinus officinalis</i>)	2 stems per bottle	Fresh, tender, non-woody stems uniform in size and development. Color is uniform and typical for species/variety.	Wilted, brown leaf edges, woody stems, flowering, stems at different stages of development, soil, dust, spray residue, or insect or mechanical damage.	Cut stems 4 to 6 inches long and trim to a uniform length. Clean gently in cool water, if needed. Place cut ends in cool water and remove leaves below the waterline.
SAGE <i>Salvia officinalis</i>	2 stems per bottle	Fresh, tender, non-woody stems uniform in size and development. Color is uniform and typical for species/variety.	Wilted, brown leaf edges, yellowing, woody stems, stems at different stages of development, flowering, soil, dust, spray residue, insect or mechanical damage, or no cultivar listed (if applicable).	Cut non-flowering stems 6 to 10 inches long and trim them to a uniform length. Clean gently in cool water, if needed (leaves bruise easily). Place cut ends in cool water and remove leaves below the waterline.
THYME <i>Thymus vulgaris</i>	3 stems per bottle	Fresh, tender, non-woody stems with uniform leaves in size, color, and development.	Wilted, browning, or yellowing of leaves, woody stems, stems at different stages of development, flowering, soil, dust, spray residue, or insect or mechanical damage.	Cut non-flowering stems 3 to 5 inches long and trim them to a uniform length. Clean gently in cool water, if needed. Place cut ends in cool water and remove leaves below the waterline. Wedge leaves with tissue or foam to prevent dropping down into the water.
ANY OTHER HERB	2 stems (or leaves, if applicable) per bottle	Fresh, clean, proper harvest stage for use, uniform in color, size, and development (i.e., if flowering, all stems flowering). Herbs grown for leaves should not be flowering; those grown for blooms should be in flower at the same stage of development.	Dirty, wilted foliage; improper stage for use; improperly labeled, no species or cultivar listed.	Cut stems to a length that provides a good specimen (typically 4 to 6 inches), Trim them to a uniform length, and rinse them in cold water if needed. Place cut ends in cool water and remove leaves below the waterline. Wedge leaves with tissue or foam to prevent dropping into the water if needed.
POTTED HERBS See guidelines for houseplants 4H 464 <i>Preparing Cut Flowers and Houseplants for Exhibits</i>				

Resources

Additional information on growing herbs is available from local ISU Extension offices and the following ISU sources.

- Extension Store <https://store.extension.iastate.edu/> 515-294-5247
- Yard and Garden Website <https://yardandgarden.extension.iastate.edu>
 - Check this site for links to horticulture newsletters, care and how-to articles, FAQs, and other resources related to gardening in Iowa.
- Iowa 4-H <https://extension.iastate.edu/4H> 515-294-1018
- Plant and Insect Diagnostic Clinic <https://yardandgarden.extension.iastate.edu/pidc>
 - pidc@iastate.edu 515-294-0581

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