

July 2010

David Sams

Judging at fairs

Judging at fairs requires attention to both general principles and to the specifics of the items being judged.

The following 5 general principles may be helpful.

1. The items judged must be **entered in the correct category**. You might, for example, find summer squash entered in the winter squash category. Some fairs will allow you to reenter selected items, others will not. I personally will disqualify items entered incorrectly rather than give them a ribbon. Winter squash may be fine winter squash but they are not summer squash and should not be awarded a ribbon as summer squash.
2. The items should **agree with the category description** in the fair catalog. If the entry calls for a plate of 5 peppers then the items should be peppers and there should be 5 of them on the plate. I frequently ask for a copy of the fair catalog and consult it as necessary.
3. Items in an entry should be **uniform**. If you are judging peppers, for example, all items in the entry should be peppers and they should be the same variety, color, maturity, size etc. They should appear as nearly identical as possible. Yellow, green and red peppers or hot peppers and bell peppers should never be mixed in a single entry!
4. Items in an entry should be typical of those items at the peak of **quality**. The largest items are the best only when the entry calls for the largest item. Items should be fresh and never wilted, refrigerated or otherwise collected over time. Bruises, cuts and abrasions and dirt should never appear on fair entries.
5. All items should be **properly harvested and displayed**. Stems should be removed or cut to the same length. Corn shucks should follow the item description in the catalog. Items should be attractively displayed on their plate or in their container.

All fruits and vegetables in individual entry's should be examined to determine if they agree with the above general principles as follows:

Beans, Lima: Pods should be uniformly green and well filled. There should be few, if any, missing beans in the pods.

Beans, snap: Green beans should be uniformly green, smooth and of the same length. They should be free from blemishes and have stems of the same length. they must be firm and not wilted or shriveled.

Cabbage: Cabbage is a cool season vegetable and will not be found at many summer fairs in Tennessee except in occasional vegetable collections. Cabbage heads should be symmetrical, heavy for their size and free from wilting, browning and insect damage.

Corn, sweet: Pull back the husks and look for corn earworm in the top of the ear. Look also for ears filled out to the end. Quality sweet corn will appear milky when a kernel is punctured by a fingernail, not pasty.

Cucumbers pickling: Judging slicing and pickling cucumbers together is almost impossible. Encourage fairs to have entries for both or to specify which the entry should consist of. Pickling cucumbers should be straight, 2 to 4 inches long and blocky. They should be green rather than yellow and appear nearly identical to each other.

Cucumbers, slicing: Appearance will depend on which of many varieties is grown. You are looking for young, firm cucumbers with little seed development. These will generally be 1 1/2 to 2 inches in diameter, uniformly green and show no trace of wilting. The length will depend on the variety. I prefer straight to crooked cucumbers.

Eggplant: Eggplant should be shiny rather than dull and uniformly colored rather than faded. There will be a slight resistance when running ones fingers lightly over a high quality eggplant. As the eggplant becomes over mature it feels very smooth without resistance.

Okra: Okra pods should be between 2 and 3 1/2 inches long. they should be uniform, green rather than brown and trimmed evenly. They should be fresh and should not be wilted. Okra tends to turn brown along the ridges after it is picked especially if it is refrigerated. Select fresh okra rather than refrigerated okra for ribbons.

Onions, dried: Dried onions should follow the general principles above. In addition, they will be covered with one or more papery layers if they are properly

cured. Pressing on the top of the bulb next to the neck will detect softening, the first sign of decay.

Peas, Southern: (Cow peas) There are frequently several categories of Southern pea entries, some green and some dried. Green and dried should not be mixed. Pods should be uniform in size, maturity and with a minimum of missing peas in the pods. Stems should be uniform in length.

Peppers: At a minimum there should be categories for hot peppers and bell peppers. Bell peppers should be uniform in size and color and have their stems trimmed to the same length. They should have thick walls. Pick them up and observe their weight and firmness to estimate the thickness of their walls. Hot peppers should be all the same size, variety and degree of ripeness. Again, their stems should be carefully trimmed to a uniform length.

Potatoes, Irish: Should be uniform in size and free from blemishes or skinned patches. Eyes should be shallow. High quality Irish potatoes should be roughly oval in shape and not elongated.

Potatoes, sweet: Again, they should be uniform in size and color and free from blemishes. they should be blocky in shape rather than strings and free from dirt.

Pumpkins: Pumpkins should have a well developed ripe color and be free from cuts and bruises. They should be symmetrical and have 2-3 inches of stem attached.

Squash, summer: summer squash should be uniformly sized and free from bruises and blemishes. Larger is likely to be over mature, not better. Stems should be uniformly trimmed. Young squash are shiny rather than dull.

Squash, winter: There are many varieties of winter squash. Winter squash develop a hard skin not easily scratched by a fingernail when they ripen. Again, they should be free of cuts and bruises, have their mature color well developed and should also be free of insect, disease damage. they should also should be harvested with 2-3 inches of stem attached.

Tomatoes: Tomatoes should be uniform in size, color and degree of ripeness. Turn the fruit stem end up. All fruit should have the stems removed (except grape tomatoes) and be uniformly free from cracking. None should show insect or disease damage, bruises or discoloration from overripe spots.

Watermelon: Watermelon are probably the most difficult item to judge within vegetable displays. Again, they should be symmetrical, free of insect, disease and physical damage and have their mature coloration. They tend to be flattened on the bottom where the weight rests. The bottom also turns yellow as the watermelon ripens. In addition, the veins of a ripe watermelon tend to become slightly raised as the melon ripens and you can feel the roughened surface with your fingertips. An unripe watermelon makes a pinging sound when tapped with a finger. This sound deepens steadily as the watermelon ripens.

It is not unusual for one judging vegetable to be asked to judge items such as dried fruit, honey, eggs, homemade soap and even wine. The 5 general principles listed above will be useful here. I also look for clarity in honey and wine and feel soap for smoothness. Wine should smell like wine, not vinegar. Dried fruit should not smell musty. Tasting wine is generally permissible and may, in fact, be the only way to accurately judge it.