

## August Ask the Experts: Grooming Dahlias for Show

The more I learn about dahlias the more I realize how much I have yet to learn. We have been so fortunate to have our guest experts sharing their wisdom for this series, especially for newer members like me. Hopefully members with more growing experience are also finding new tidbits to add to their



The Honor Table at the 2022 CSDS Dahlia Show.  
Photo credit: Vida Wu

dahlia knowledge as well. This month we explore a topic I am learning about for the first time - "Grooming Dahlias For Show." As we have seen in earlier columns, growers may differ on the exact techniques they employ in growing dahlias, and each grower hones their own successful practices over time. Your choices may differ if you're growing for your own enjoyment versus growing for show, and there is no right or wrong answer if you're pleased with your results! However, if you are looking to be on the honor table come September, there are some practices to keep in mind. The timing in which you employ certain techniques becomes especially important - as I discovered last year.

When the CSDS Dahlia show came around last September, my dahlia growing experience had been brief. I had only been growing dahlias for about a year and a half. I started my tubers indoors at the end of February to take cuttings for the first time after learning the technique as a new volunteer on the propagation team at Friendship Park. Kevin Maloney, David Sales, Lawrence Benzik, and the propagation teams were, and continue to be, wonderful mentors in teaching about propagation. As a new volunteer, I was fortunate to be given a small Breakout tuber to nurture at home for the purpose of practicing. In May and early June, I planted out my presprouted tubers and cuttings, and by early July, I had my first magical blooms of the season. Unfortunately, by show time in September, my dahlias weren't giving off many blooms. I had a beautiful round of blooms the week before, but not much by the time I would have had to prepare blooms for the show. With no decent dahlia specimens to enter, I ended up participating in the photography competition instead. Luckily, I had taken several photos while my plants were in their prime!



My first propagation practice tuber - transformed into this gorgeous Breakout bloom.  
Photo credit: Vida Wu

Even after consuming hours of YouTube videos on growing dahlias and reading blog after blog, and even though I was pinching and disbudding, I hadn't learned about the importance of timing the topping of your dahlias for show or the techniques I needed to employ to do it successfully. In last month's newsletter, past President and current board member Jim Kassner shared a [timing model developed by John Thiermann](#), a long-time officer of the Wisconsin Dahlia Society. Before Mr.

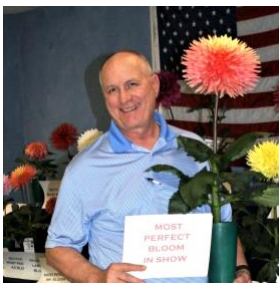
Thiermann passed away, he had developed a method for predicting when a dahlia would be at its peak for various shows in the Midwest Dahlia Conference. In this month's expert column, we explore the topic of timing when growing for show and how Jim and Rusty Ritchie - both veterans (and award recipients) of countless dahlia shows - prepare their dahlias for their time in the spotlight. Jim's stunning Clearview Edie won "Best in Show" at CSDS's show last year so I'm looking forward to learning more!

Let's check in with our experts. This month's background question is **"What encouraged you to enter your first show?"**



**Rusty Ritchie:** My dad was very competitive. He loved showing off huge blooms, and winning sweepstakes. A little of that may have rubbed off. In ninth grade, I had about 20 plants and disappointing results, but a variety called Mary Elizabeth produced five nice blooms so I exhibited a group of five but not competitively. A blue ribbon would have ruined my novice status. Once I had my own home, I took exhibiting a little more seriously, but I don't remember my novice year. During the late 70's and much of the 80's I would go to about six shows a year. I cut back on shows for the same reason I quit smoking. It was killing me. Children also entered the picture later in the 80's so the dahlia patch became a soccer field, and exhibiting took a backseat. Early in the 21<sup>st</sup>

century, I reclaimed the soccer field, and began exhibiting again. I must say that having a partner that also loves dahlias can be energizing.



**Jim Kassner:** In 2007, I decided not to grow a veggie garden and instead went looking for perennials. Elk Grove Village was holding their annual farmer's market where I decided to buy five dahlias on sale, even though I knew nothing about them. I

was later introduced to Frank Campise who was the "pied piper of CSDS". He started mentoring me on how to propagate dahlias and gave me a lot of plants and taught me how to store them. In 2009, I decided to enter my first show. Frank came by my house in the pouring rain the night before, umbrella in hand, advising me on which ones to take. I just ran around cutting whichever blooms he pointed to, getting soaked in the process. I grew 35 plants that year and entered 20 blooms. I showed up to the Chicago Botanic Garden at 5:00 a.m. with my dahlias but no tools or any supplies. I didn't know anyone - only Steve and Cammi Kuiper were there at that pre-dawn hour, and I had to ask to borrow Steve's knife. The effort was worth it - I won the novice division that year and I've been exhibiting ever since.



**Jim Kassner with his mentor Frank Campise at Jim's first CSDS show in 2009. Frank, a long-time and cherished member of CSDS passed away in 2019. The Frank Campise Memorial Award is dedicated in his honor and is given to the best single bloom entry of Kelvin Floodlight each year. Photo credit: Jim Kassner**



## What importance if any do you give to shows in terms of picking what dahlias to grow?

**Rusty Richie:** I try to grow all types of dahlias, because variety is part of the fascination people have for dahlias.

When deciding how many to grow of certain types, wedding colors or special events will factor in. A local museum has used our flowers for their big summer event for several years. This is the 50th anniversary, so yellow and bronze is well represented. August and September weddings have enlisted our blooms, and a few times we did the whole wedding (brides' bouquets, boutonnieres, corsages, altar flowers, etc). They are a lot of work, so we don't go looking for business.



Rusty and Anita's dahlias growing happily.  
Photo credit: Rusty and Anita Ritchie

I rarely seek out new varieties for shows. At the shows I often see varieties I would happily add to my garden the next year, but that is because I want a beautiful garden. It's fun to win, but it is not what motivates us. Anita seems to find more varieties that she would like to grow, but again, her motivation is not competitive, it's to cultivate beauty.



**Jim Kassner:** I give great importance to shows when picking varieties. I plan my order by looking at the ADS (American Dahlia Society) booklets. The [Cream of the Crop](#) is a list of cultivars that have received at least 15 combined blue and higher awards, and the [Fabulous Fifty](#) are the dahlias that earn more than 50 blue and higher awards in ADS shows within one exhibition season. With 500 dahlias I might have some blooming too early so I donate them. I take vases of flowers to retirement homes and hospitals. My mom is in a retirement community, so I bring blooms there for the nurses and residents to enjoy.

## When you look over your garden, how do you decide which actual blooms you are likely to exhibit?

To assure Jim has blooms timed to mature for each show he plans to enter, Jim pinches according to the Thiermann's timing chart. Jim's pinches can be quite a bit more than a pinch sometimes 12 inches!  
Photo credit: Jim Kassner

**Jim Kassner:** Two weeks before a show I start to look at buds and look for color. I also refer to the bottom of the [timing chart \(developed by John Thiermann\)](#) to have an idea when I can expect to see blooms. (*Editor's note: Looking at the chart, by*

*August 19, Jim would hope to see a pea size bud on his AA blooms. About two weeks before the CSDS show, which would be the first days of September, he would want to see much further*



Jim estimates this bloom is about 22 days away from opening. Photo credit: Vida Wu

*development past the pea stage.*) I will remove buds that will bloom too early. I look to see if the involucre bracts are starting to open (the green leaf-like growth that encircles the emerging buds). If so, we're getting within two weeks of the bloom. Mother Nature can alter the timing on the chart, but I try to follow the chart as closely as possible to determine when to pinch. To protect the color of the bloom and protect the bud, I put up umbrellas. Some growers may try to adjust the blooms to achieve the ideal 45-degree bloom position by using a rod to prop up the bud into that position, but I've rarely done that. (Jim notes that he will disbud and disbranch to achieve best results. For AA & A sizes, he will grow 2, 3 or 4 laterals per plant. For B & BB, he will allow up to 8 laterals. For more information on topping, disbudding and disbranching check out our expert columns for [June](#) and [July](#).)



Jim estimates maturity in about two weeks for this one. Photo credit: Vida Wu

**Rusty Ritchie:** I try to have a good idea of what blooms are going to the show by the time Friday arrives. I usually have to do some garden judging with the larger blooms since I can only pack about 30 big ones. The small stuff can fit into all sorts of spaces. I will choose the fresher blooms to bring to a show. Sometimes they don't look so fresh after the trip, so you can imagine how the more mature blooms might look after the trip. I know they get judged on Saturday, but I always hope they will still look good on Sunday afternoon.



Rusty's transportation bucket. He drills holes at the top of the buckets and uses string to tie the blooms securely. Rusty found that pipe cleaners rust too quickly. Photo credit: Rusty and Anita Ritchie

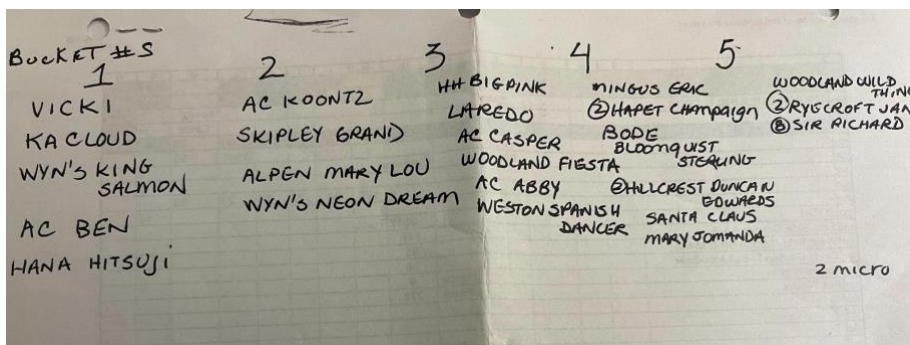
## When and how do you cut the specimens you choose to exhibit?

**Rusty Ritchie:** For most dahlia shows, I cut on Friday morning. By 10:00 am I call it quits. Large blooms go into buckets that might hold four to six blooms. I use oasis blocks to help anchor the stems, and then I secure the stem at the top of the bucket. I use the coldest water I can to soak the oasis. Smaller varieties are also packed with oasis blocks in smaller tubs.



**Jim Kassner:** Water your dahlias the night before. Cut as late in the day after the heat of the day is gone around 6:30 to 7:00 pm. Make sure they are hydrated before cutting. It's a mistake to cut in the heat of the day. I usually cut them as close to sunup as possible on the day of show, but I have cut them Wednesday or Thursday night as well if I have a lot of blooms or I have to travel. I also use about two inches of hot tap water from the bottom of the bucket, to sear my stems after cutting and I let the stems cool in that water. I also add Floralife. You can also poke a hole an inch above the cut stems to allow more water to go up the stalk but I don't always have the time to do that. Be sure to keep at least the first pair of leaves which is mandatory. You can have multiple sets of leaves but you must have at least one pair. Twelve to sixteen inches of stem is recommended. The foliage should look

proportionate to the bloom.



Jim lists each bucket's contents to keep multiple blooms well organized.  
Photo credit: Jim Kassner

Also, I recommend cataloging the blooms as you cut for the show. I draw a picture of my transportation buckets and make lists under each bucket. There are many similar blooms and mistakes should be avoided with preparation.

No matter where your blooms come from you should try to confirm that the name on the tag

is correct. I also fill out my show tags after cutting my blooms and rubber band the tags together for each bucket.

**What methods do you use to care for and store your dahlias during the time you cut your dahlias to the time you stage your blooms at the venue? Do you have any tips on how to best transport your cut blooms to the venue?**

**Rusty Ritchie:** The blooms spend the day in the van, parked in the shade with the A/C on. Sometimes we go set up on Friday and sometimes Saturday morning. Thanks to the hospitality of the Reberskys (second generation growers and longtime members of the Southtown Dahlia Club and CSDS) the trip to the (Chicago) Botanical Gardens is much more relaxing. We don't have to cut, drive and set-up all in one day. When transporting blooms, Dad always said, "Drive like you are driving on ice." Nuff said?



Jim's bloom-filled buckets staying cool inside.  
Photo credit: Jim Kassner



**Jim Kassner:** After I cut them I place them in buckets and bring them into the house and put the A/C on. I keep them out of sunlight and if it's cool, I use a spray bottle to mist the foliage to keep them hydrated.

Jim's overall "Best in Show" win with Clearview Edie at CSDS's Dahlia Show in 2022. Photo credit: Sonia Harmon

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A big thank you to this month's experts Rusty Ritchie and Jim Kassner. A special thanks also to Jim and Debbe Kassner for giving me a firsthand look at their amazing dahlia operation earlier this season and to Jim for being so generous with sharing not only dahlia plants but also his wealth of knowledge. Note that Jim and Rusty's knowledge have come from decades of participating in shows and that new dahlia growers should not be daunted by all this information. Jim wants to encourage members to show their dahlias. He suggests newbies start out by manicuring a few plants to see the difference firsthand and encourages the basics of disbudding and lateral management for good overall plant health.

Our friends at The Southtown Dahlia Club have an excellent chart entitled ["When Will My Dahlia Open?"](#) towards the bottom of their show page on their website. You can check it out at the link for helpful information on the stages of bloom development and for details on their upcoming fall show.

Hope you found these tips helpful and that you'll consider entering our show on September 16, 2023. Mentors are always on hand to help if you have questions. Our next column will feature part two on tips for the show with a focus on onsite preparations. Happy growing to everyone!

*Column edited by Vida Wu*