

GETTING DAFFODILS TO LOOK THEIR BEST FOR THE SHOW

How to pick and hold your flowers for show day

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Show organizers schedule their flower shows for weekends so exhibitors and visitors can attend during leisure time. However, Mother Nature does not obey such a time frame. During warmer weather, many blooms can open quickly, and sharp temperature drops can freeze or damage already opened blooms. Where I live in Kentucky, wildly variable spring weather is as much a part of the landscape as bluegrass and horses, but lately the temperature swings and violent weather have become more and more commonplace. And of course, all of this stuff happens early in the week. So if I am interested in exhibiting flowers, how can I pick them at the appropriate time and keep them looking good on show day?

To do this, you will need to claim space in a refrigerator somewhere. Non-frost-free refrigerators are great, and floral coolers are ideal, but most of us have neither. The ideal candidate would be the refrigerator in the garage or basement which holds beer and soda. If the refrigerator holds food, remember many produce items give off ethylene gas, which ages flowers, but if you have no other refrigerators, you get away with using it for a few days. If you are lucky enough to have a cool basement, you can hold flowers there as well, but keep in mind they will age a bit more quickly than in the refrigerator, as the temperature is warmer.

Kirby Fong from California is fond of saying that a daffodil flower starts to die as soon as it blooms. I think that's a really depressing statement about such a bright, beautiful flower which has come to symbolize spring awakening. But – from an exhibitor's standpoint, he is right. Refrigeration works mainly by slowing down the aging process.

One other important thing to know is the weather. Daffodils and other spring bulbs send up foliage and break dormancy depending on ground temperatures. However, once the buds are above ground, they respond mainly to air temperature. The warmer it is, the more quickly they will open (sometimes too quickly). The colder it is, the slower they open.

So, our goal is to pick the flowers when they are at or close to peak condition, and try to hold them for the show. Let's take a look at some pictures to help us determine when peak condition occurs.



This flower is still in bud.
Given good weather with
average temperatures, it will
probably be ready in two days.



This flower is a bit further along, as the petals are beginning to unfurl. It will probably be ready in a day and a half, but if it is warm, it will take about half that time.



This flower is close to being ready. Knowing the weather for the day is really helpful here. If it is going to be nice, I would leave it out and check it later in the afternoon or tomorrow morning. If heavy rain is in the immediate forecast, I would pick it now. To finish its development, you can put it in a warm, protected spot for a few hours. When it is fully open, it can go to the fridge.



This flower is ready to be picked. It is looking straight at you, and shows good form with a straight cup and flat petals.



This flower has been left out too long. With the backlighting, you can see that the petals are starting to thin out, and you can definitely see that the petals look like crepe paper. Crepiness comes from winds which blow and dry out the flower. If strong winds are in the forecast I tend to pick sooner rather than later.

We have been talking about warmer weather, but keep in mind colder weather also has an effect on blooms. Daffodils will age much more slowly in colder weather, in fact 45 degrees F with misty rain is ideal for holding flowers at their current stage of development. If that's the forecast, you are safe keeping blooms outside.

You do want to pick if the temperature is forecast to go below 30 degrees F if the flower is fully open. Most early flowers do fine if the temperature is right around freezing, but later varieties may have a tougher time.

If you have been to a daffodil show before, you will notice that nearly all of the winners have petals which go straight up and down, with cups at a straight 90 degree angle to the petals. When I'm out in the garden, that pattern is what first catches my eye. As I get closer to the flower, I look for other features which will determine if that flower can come to the show or if it stays out in the garden. Grooming can fix a lot of things, but major faults such as mittens, torn cups, burnt cups, or green on doubles make a flower ineligible for show.

Let's look at some pictures of these faults:



This flower looks great – nice color, smooth petals, beautiful cup. However, the mitten on the 10 o'clock petal means it stays in the garden to welcome visitors.



Here's another nice flower which suffered freeze damage when the temperatures got to 11 degrees F. The 8 o'clock petal is mitted, thin, and deformed, as that side of the bud suffered frost damage.

Daffodil buds are very hardy and will survive temperatures in the mid 20's fairly well, but the teens are another story.



Here's another obvious mitten which really detracts from the appearance of the flower.



Here's how a mitten forms. The bud normally forces itself open using the very tips of the petals. Normally the petals open and unfurl away from the cup. Sometimes frilly cups catch petals as they try to open, leaving notches in the petals. Hot weather usually means more mittens because flowers tend to open too quickly. Also, some varieties (especially Ice Follies) tend to mitten a lot, regardless of the weather. Your only defense against this is a lot of water.



Another serious fault is a burned cup. Burning happens because darkly colored parts of the flower absorb more sunlight than the substance of the flower can handle. The edge of the cup will start to look crispy and dry. Orange-red rimmed or solid cups and poets do this the most, especially when left out too long.



Another fault with deeply colored cups is their tendency to bleach in the sun. You can definitely see the fading on the top of the cup on this flower.



This flower is a lot older. The cup is faded almost to the point of becoming white.



Here's what this flower (Scarlet Chord) looks like under optimal conditions.



Green petals on the backs of doubles are considered a major fault. The front of this flower looks great, however the back has issues. As the green fades it will curl the back row of petals and really change the look of the flower negatively.



These look a lot better. The back row of petals will lay flat, which will improve the look of the flower significantly.

OK, so now that you know what to look for out in the garden, it's time to pick your best flowers and bring them in.

For collecting flowers, choose a wide-based container which will not get blown over by strong March winds.

The best way to pick a daffodil is to run your fingers down the stem to the base of the plant, and snap the stem off. Some growers cut, but that runs the risk of spreading virus from plant to plant. Immediately after picking, I write the name of the flower on the bottom of the stem – low enough that it won't be visible after I stage the flower, but high enough to leave room to recut the stem. Some flowers you will know by sight as they are very unique, but yellow trumpets and division 2 all yellow flowers look remarkably similar once you get them inside.

Once inside, I like to take a good look at what I picked under excellent light. (In my house, that is the kitchen, and I have to be careful not to disrupt dinner preparation with my timing.) I will examine flowers for nicks, mittens, bruises, bug damage, and anything I may have missed outside. Once they pass inspection I then **clock** my flowers. Clocking is rotating the flower slightly in either direction to make sure that the top petal is at 12 o'clock. To do this, hold the flower at its base and rotate slightly in either direction. Most flowers clock easily, some with thicker stems do not. Practice clocking on flowers you know are not going to the show before working on your show flowers.



These flowers are properly clocked. You can see that this greatly enhances the form and symmetry of the flower, which will impress the judges.

Now is the time to clean off your flowers. Any dirt left on the flower will stain it once it goes into the refrigerator, so it is important to clean them now. Cleaning flowers is pretty low-tech; I use Q-tips and water. Rub **gently** with a wet Q-tip to remove dirt and discolorations. Daffodils are a lot tougher than daylilies or irises, but the petals can still bruise if rubbed too vigorously.

If there is a lot of pollen in the cup of the flower, brush it out with an artist's paint brush.

Here is my standard setup for cleaning and grooming daffodils.

Note:

- Flowers that are going to the show are in the Ale-8 bottle.
- Flowers that are staying home are in the vase.
- Note water and lots of Q-tips.
- Note the daffodil stem on the cutting board. I recut all of my stems before they go in the fridge.
- Pen and paper are a must. I will write down the names, color codes and other information on this so I know what I have. If you have a lot of



Now is a good time to sort your flowers. You can see what you have, and group like flowers together. Some exhibitors label individual bottles with flower names, some do not.

Everyone seems to have different ways of storing flowers in the refrigerator and taking them to the show. I started off with heavy soda bottles, and since it has worked, I have never varied. I will place anywhere from 2 to 5 flowers in each bottle. As I fill them, I try to keep like flowers, or flowers with like characteristics together, as it makes it easier to sort when I get to the show venue.

I try to keep my refrigerator between 36 to 40 degrees. If it gets too cold, blooms can freeze, and if it gets too warm, they will age too quickly.

The key to using a regular refrigerator to hold blooms is to keep them **moist**. Most frost-free refrigerators will excessively dry flowers, so you have to do something to add humidity to the refrigerator. You can do this with open cups or pans of water or damp towels. I will also check on my blooms once or twice a day and mist them with plain water. If you stay on top of the moisture, they will do fine.



Here are some flowers getting ready to go to a show. I have placed my bottles in an old wooden carrier in honeycomb fashion so a full crate fits about 12 bottles. There is usually room for smaller flowers on the sides. Note the squeeze bottles in the front which are useful for topping up bottles and test tubes whilst not disturbing the flowers.



Here is a slightly different setup. The larger mouthed bottles can hold more flowers and are more effective when used with a cooler.

If you do not have a spare freezer or cool basement, there is another method you can use to keep your blooms fresh until show day. You will need a shelf in your regular refrigerator. Cut your stems as described above and clean them. Next, take a flat box, and line it with tissue paper. Lay the stems down flat, with cups up so that the flowers overlap slightly. Once one row is filled, start on the other side of the box, and once those first rows are filled, start a second row just below it. If desired, you can separate the rows with “pillows” of tissue paper. Once the box is filled it should look like this:



A full box of flowers destined for the 2016 World Daffodil Convention in St. Louis. Courtesy of Mary Lou Gripshover.

Store the box, covered, in your refrigerator.

The day before the show, open your box and examine your flowers. Some may look wilted, but we are about to fix that. Get a large container of lukewarm water, and recut the stems under water, leaving them in the container. The reason it's important to recut the stems underwater is that they will take a big gulp of water as soon as they are cut, and this avoids them gulping air instead of water. Let them rehydrate for 24 hours at room temperature, and they should be ready to go.

Now that you know how to prepare your flowers to get to the show, let's discuss how to get them there in one piece. They are far less brittle than irises or daylilies, and will tolerate being bunched together loosely.

If you are traveling a short distance, or are travelling early in the morning when temperatures are cool, you can easily and safely transport your flowers in the back of your vehicle. If you are travelling a fair distance, and will be on the road in the afternoon, temperatures can get hot inside the vehicle, and even if you have the air conditioning cranked up all the way, the strong sunlight may be enough to burn

cups and age flowers. For these trips, we use a cooler and transport our flowers standing up. I will place the flowers in the center of the cooler (usually in an empty six bottle container or two), and surround them with ice packs and/or damp towels. I want to try to maintain humidity in the cooler, and I don't want the flowers moving around, as they will be damaged if their petals rest up against the cooler wall.



Flowers in the back of the car headed to a show in the wee hours of the morning.



An example of flowers packed in a cooler. This exhibitor placed cardboard in the base of the cooler and cut out holes specifically to fit his containers. This was necessary as these went from Mississippi to California for a national convention show. Note no flowers are touching the side wall.

Lastly, if you are a new exhibitor, it's a good idea to fill out your entry tags ahead of time, or at least know what you are likely to enter. Time is always very valuable the morning of the show, so it pays to be as efficient as possible. If you are new at daffodil exhibiting, reading and understanding the show schedule can be one of the most difficult things you can do. It is a good idea to do this the night before when you have time to look at the schedule closely.

	Rapture	64-y	Mitsch	
	Tazin	64-R	Mitsch	
	Straight Arrow	64-R	Mitsch	
	Flat Arrow	64-0	RIE Havens	
C	Jetfire	64-0	Mitsch	1966
	Surfride	6w-1	Mitsch	
C	Larkshoe	64-y		1960
	Buchanan	6w-6w	Reed	
	Scarlet Chord	24-R	Mitsch	
	Miss Primon	24-y	Dorwin	
	Three Oaks	1w-y	Reed	
	Manemnt	14-0	Reed	
C	Gold Crown	2w-y	Mitsch	1965
C	Conarka	14-w	Mitsch	1954
C	Pitmore	2w-40	Link	1958
	Marie Dia	114-R	Duncan	

An example of a show list, complete with poor handwriting. I have cultivar name and color code for each flower. Additional information is hybridizer and year introduced. The years are important because cultivars introduced between 1940 and 1969 are classics and before 1940 are historic, and they have their own section in the show.

Looking at this list, we will have enough flowers to put in a collection of five division 6 flowers. There are also a lot of American bred flowers on this list so we should be able to assemble a strong candidate for the red, white and blue ribbon.



Here is an example of a correctly filled out entry tag. Note the use of address labels, which saves rewriting information over and over.

I hope this has been helpful to you. Daffodil exhibiting has been a fantastic hobby for us, and has allowed us to meet people from all over the country, as well as different parts of the world.

Future articles in this series will include discussions on how to read the show schedule and plan your entries effectively, and how to stage your flowers so that they will look their best for the judges.



Staging area at the National Show, 2018, Nashville.