

Herbs – to flower or not to flower.

Emily Plumb, Southern Branch.



I was wondering whether anyone could shed any light on the topic of exhibiting herbs with flowers on. The NVS Handbook describes a meritorious specimen as one which ‘...should be clean of foliage with no sign of ageing, free from pest or disease damage.’ The RHS Handbook describes a meritorious specimen as one that is ‘fresh, healthy, clean...’ and some defective characteristics are ‘material that is not fresh and clean is yellowing or showing other signs of age or pest damage or has any disease’.

Therefore, I was wondering whether I would be able to get any clarification on whether you can succeed at a show with herbs that have flowers on. Personally, seeing a vase of herbs with flowers on makes me think of a specimen which has passed its prime condition – you would not show another vegetable, such as a cauliflower or a lettuce, which had bolted.

I appreciate that the flowers on some herbs are edible, such as those on chives, but when half of the points that can be awarded to a specimen are given for its condition, with the only guidelines on what is ‘good condition’ being that the **foliage** is clean and fresh, it seems to me that the decision regarding flowers at present is to the judge’s discretion alone – neither judge’s handbook makes any direct reference to flowers.

This means that if you choose not to show herbs with flowers on, that you have a harder job when trying to select a class of 6 vases of herbs, as you exclude all the specimens you have grown which have got to the stage of flowering. However, when judging takes place, depending on the judge, you can be beaten by an exhibit which contains one or more vases of herbs which contain flowers. On the other hand, if you choose to show herbs with flowers on, you can again be penalised by a different judge, as they are not tolerant of flowers on herbs. Therefore, I feel that there is huge scope for inconsistency in the judging of herbs at present.





Barry Newman, National Chairman replies;

Emily makes a very good point and is something I come across regularly both in judging and when talking to groups on show preparation. Of course we try to remove subjectivity in judging as far we can, but as she observes there is no reference to flowers in either the NVS Judges Guide or RHS Show Handbook for cut Herbs, so at present a judge will adjudicate on his particular preference.

Personally I agree that flowers have no part in a vase of Culinary Herbs, but I am sure this will provoke a healthy debate. The matter is exacerbated by our own list found in the glossary of the Judges Guide which examples the most commonly exhibited cut Herbs, some of which are impossible to show without flowers! I very much concur with Emily; flowers on the majority of herbs we see on the show bench signify that a plant is past its best from a foliage perspective and moving in to the reproductive stage.

So, what do we do to remove the subjectivity and provide helpful advice to both exhibitors and judges?

The short answer is we debate the matter (not always the short answer!) reach a majority decision and then make any necessary adjustment in the handbook.

Whilst considering the exhibition of Herbs we might also want to make the distinction between Culinary and Medicinal varieties, as I feel our interest should principally be with the former. A new glossary could then be created which would be useful for schedule makers, as well as judges and exhibitors.

Having said all that Emily is to be congratulated on her observations and keeping us on our toes!

All the Best

Barry Newman, Chairman NVS

Our National President, Medwyn replies;

This is really a mind blowing question and coming from a young exhibitor as well. It really does open our minds to the issue of herbs in general when we come to judge them. This is certainly a deep question and one that Emily is to be congratulated on. With the NEC's permission, and after their deliberations, I would like to take this one to the FV&Herbs committee of the RHS where I have Jecka McVicar on my committee, amongst others, a well known expert on herbs. Perhaps it might make her think as well also showing what an interest has been shown by a young member of our Society. Hope that is of some help to you.

Regards

Medwyn.

President.

NEC Member Mary Thomas from the Welsh Branch replies;

In response to Emily Plumb's query, may I first congratulate her for seeing into something that has bugged many a judge.

I looked up The Cambridge Dictionary and a definition of 'herbs' reads: *a type of plant whose leaves are used in cooking to give flavour to particular dishes, or which is used in making medicine.*

The Oxford Dictionary reads: *any plant with leaves, seeds or flowers used for flavouring food, medicine or perfume,*

But a Botanist describes it as: *any seed bearing plant which does not have a woody stem and dies down to the ground after flowering*

I, like Emily agree that if it flowers that it is not young and fresh also bearing in mind the fact that, flavour wise, herbs reach their peak just before flowering.

Of course, flowers and seeds are used as culinary ingredients in cookery, but personally I think this is where common sense prevails as most schedules ask for a **vase** or a number of vases. I would expect to find fresh green foliage with no sign of flowers or seed and free from any sign of pest damage etc. Should there be one vase of bright green herbs with no sign of flowers or seed but with some pest damage, it would be down pointed in favour of a clean vase with flower buds.

Mary Thomas, Welsh Branch.

Thank you to the three experienced growers, judges and exhibitors for their views, what do you think? - ed