

The Society's Judges' Examination

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What is the N.V.S. trying to achieve in setting a judges' examination and what should the candidates expect when sitting the exam?

The first point is that vegetable judging is not an exact science, certain criteria can be used, but at the end of the day personal opinion may prevail.

Prior to the formation of the N.V.S. the only attempt at standardising vegetable judging was that in the R.H.S. *Horticultural Show Handbook*, there was no training or examination. In fact, one of the aims of those who founded the Society in 1960 was to improve the standard of vegetable judging. Since then the N.V.S. has engaged in the training and examination of judges and has produced a *Judges' Guide* for vegetables.

This has resulted in a national standard of vegetable judging which enables societies throughout the country to engage competent people to judge the vegetable sections at their shows.

Many years ago judges were simply appointed from amongst experienced gardeners (mainly from estate gardens and park superintendents). Each gardener had his (and it was almost invariably his, not hers) own idea of what a winning leek or onion should look like. Inevitably this usually meant the bigger the better and quality, condition and uniformity were sometimes secondary factors.

Over the last 20 years (at least) newly qualified judges as a whole (there is always the odd maverick or exception) have been working to a clear range of criteria laid down in the *Judges' Guide*. Now, vegetable exhibitors throughout Great Britain can put exhibits on the show bench knowing that their exhibits will receive uniform and fair appraisal. All judges are singing from the same hymn-sheet and using the same criteria. No matter whether you exhibit at the local village show or the N.V.S. National Championships your produce should receive the same appraisal - assuming the show organisers have appointed an N.V.S. certificated judge. However, judging is like refereeing a football match, there is always debate and sometimes controversy.

Judges must be able to justify their decisions. A good judge always stays in the hall after judging to answer questions and, hopefully, explain to disgruntled (usually 2nd or 3rd placed exhibitors) why their exhibit has not been placed first.

One must always assume that judges are honest, sometimes in the heat of the moment (or a senior moment) mistakes can be made. Nonetheless, with proper training and good use of the *Judges' Guide* certificated N.V.S. judges do an excellent job throughout the country.

What should a candidate expect when sitting the judges' exam? When I sat my judges' exam (25 years ago now) I was not particularly interested in becoming a judge, I simply thought that if I could "think like a judge" I would be able to bench exhibits that fitted the judging criteria and therefore gain more first prizes. I think it worked to a certain extent, but it also made me aware what a difficult job judging is!

If you wish to sit the judges' exam there are several rules that must be followed:

- You must have been a member of the N.V.S. for at least one year.
- You must have accompanied an experienced judge at several flower shows and be aware of schedules and general protocol.
- You must have read, and have a good working knowledge of, the *N.V.S. Judges' Guide*.

In addition to these rules it would be beneficial to have a good background in general gardening and it would also be very helpful to have experience of exhibiting.

I have often heard it stated that good exhibitors make good judges, and over the years making up exam papers and looking at shows I feel I can justify that statement. There is no doubt that if you grow and show vegetables you will have a much greater empathy with the judging principles. But there are also lots of very good judges who do not grow or show!

The exam is normally held on the first Saturday of October in each of the five Branches and consists of two parts - the theory paper and practical test.

The Theory Paper

This is collated by the Judges Examination Board (Malcolm Evans, Ivor Mace and myself). The structure and content is very similar from year to year and past papers can be obtained for practice.

The paper is almost wholly based on the *N.V.S. Judges Guide* but in addition several questions depend on general knowledge of gardening, for example:

- Chocolate spot is a common problem of which vegetable?
- Ghost spot is a common problem of which vegetable?

And one must have a good retention of the names of different cultivars.

However, a candidate is not expected to memorise the guide, or to have a photographic memory. We try to avoid asking questions that simply require memorising lots of numbers etc. - for example the different points values for onions.

Sections A and B of the Theory paper are both compulsory with questions worth 14 marks overall. Section C has eighteen questions from which the candidate can select twelve questions each worth 6 marks. Candidates are allowed 2 hours to complete the paper, and we feel that this is more than sufficient time.

Section A

This has a very simple "tick box" format, where the candidate has 14 individual questions each worth 1 mark, and he/she ticks the correct box from a choice of 3 or 4 answers. Most candidates score highly in this section.

Section B

This contains 7 questions worth 2 marks each, there can be a wide variety of subjects in this section.

Section C

It is worth while having a good read through all 18 questions and then selecting the 12 which you can answer best. If at first you think there are not many you can do well read through again - you will be surprised how many you can actually answer easily!

The pass mark is 75% and over the last 4-5 years the pass rate has been over 80%. It is obvious that candidates from Branches that hold "coaching" seminars score very highly in the theory paper.

The most common mistakes seen in the theory paper, are candidates giving "one word" answers e.g. yes or no. You cannot expect to score full marks unless you give a reasonably full answer. Where 2 marks are awarded for an answer, you must give two clear descriptive accounts to score full marks. In some questions there are parts a and b and sometimes candidates only answer part a, therefore losing valuable marks. It is important to read the question carefully to discover what you need to do.

In Section C only twelve questions should be answered and candidates sometimes attempt more than twelve. When marking these papers we only mark the first twelve attempted questions, therefore candidates attempting more, waste valuable time.

The Practical Test

This is usually held on the Saturday afternoon after candidates have completed the theory paper. Branches are dependent on members supplying good quality, show standard vegetables to set up a small show, however, organisers try to avoid using vegetables, such as tomatoes, that might be damaged after handling by several candidates. The test is divided into 3 sections.

The first section consists of 8 individual classes each comprising 5 dishes of vegetables, for example potatoes, stump carrots etc. they are labelled A, B, C, D and E. Candidates must find 1st, 2nd and 3rd.

The second section is a deliberate fault class, the candidates will examine three individual distinct kinds of vegetables or photographs of vegetables which should have a clear fault.

The third section is made up of two collections staged, usually on boards. Each collection has 5 dishes of 5 kinds with 3 specimens of each. Each dish must be pointed to give 1st and 2nd.

The "show" for the practical test is judged by two experienced, N.V.S. certificated judges, with a third as "moderator" to oversee the setting up of the mini show. The moderator is the focal point for the Branch examination. He or she will be a Branch official or other person well versed in show and examination matters and will be responsible to the Examination Board. Any and all queries occurring during the practical test will be referred to, and dealt with, by the moderator.

The duties of the moderator will be to oversee the practical part of the examination and to ensure candidates' satisfaction with the conduct of the examination. It will be the moderator's responsibility to ensure the provision (by others) of the required vegetables in accordance with the "Practical Part" construction details sheet and to oversee the staging of the classes

having delegated persons for this duty. The moderator will be the only person present, other than the candidates', during the practical test.

He or she will listen to and assess each candidate in order to form an opinion of their ability and approach. The moderator's observations will be noted on the candidate's paper.

A Guide to assist the Moderator in assessing candidates' practical ability:

Box marking:

1. Good, confident, well thought out explanation in reasonable time - gave the correct result.
2. Handles exhibits with authority and carefully, methodical.
3. Hesitant, slightly on the slow side, explanations vague.
4. Did not handle or lift all exhibits - failed to notice obvious faults.
5. Indecisive, "jittery" no method, took too much time! Completely wrong result.

Two pre-judges are appointed to judge the show. They must be experienced, certificated N.V.S. judges. They judge the 8 classes, giving a first, second and third in each class e.g. Class 1 potatoes 1 st B, 2nd C and 3rd D.

Lastly they judge and point the two collections.

When marking the practical the candidates' results are compared directly with those of the pre-judges - and, obviously, the nearer their decisions to the pre judges' results the higher the marks scored.

The pass mark in the practical is also 75%, however, the pass rate is much lower than the theory normally averaging out at about 50% pass. There are several reasons why the pass rate is lower, depending on the quality of vegetables, the marking of the pre judges and obviously the experience or lack of it of the candidate.

Each theory and practical paper is marked individually by the three members of the Examination Board to achieve an overall score.