State Fair Horticulture – It’s Not Too Early for a ‘Top Five List’ of Ways to Get Ready!

Plates of beautiful vegetables.
Lovingly displayed pressed flower pictures. Smiling, proud young people who know how to grow! Hey, we must be talking about the Great New York State Fair.

Even as the temperatures hover below freezing, our seeds are ordered, and we’re already thinking about gardening! Now is a great time to prepare for the Fair. Here are some things to keep in mind as you get ready for the gardening season, and ultimately, for that great experience of encouraging youth to show others the fruits of their labor.

Here we offer a Top Five List in an effort to promote good communication between youth and evaluators, and to ensure that the State Fair experience is a capstone of pride in growing – not a disappointment or frustration.

Know how to show
Part of the process of exhibiting your “best” at a state level is to know how to display produce properly. Check out Vegetable Fare, it’s excellent! Do be sure to double check the specific requirements offered in this publication against the state fair book for the numbers – they may be different. For example, at State Fair, youth do not need to show 10 peas; we ask for just five.

Be class-y!
There is nothing that frustrates an evaluator more than to have to down grade a child’s fabulous garden project, simply because he or she displayed it in the incorrect class. Work with young people to make sure that they are placing their work in the right category. For example, an arrangement is not a bouquet – an arrangement is a floral design. Simply read through all the descriptions in the Fair book to make sure everyone is on track.
Fill out the card properly
Gotta sign those EIS cards! When you as an educator sign those cards, you verify that exhibit is complete and has met all entry/exhibit requirements. Tops and bottoms, front and back, all that exhibitor information ought to be accurate. Again, it’s a heart break to lose a placement simply because a variety isn’t listed, or if a name and address is missing. Last year we took the time to encourage this in horticulture, and what a difference! Thank you for your attentiveness to this!

Keep it cool
This is when we get “clothing envy!” Whereas cloth can withstand the temperatures of a hot mini-van, your lovingly grown cucumbers, and beautifully arranged floral displays cannot. Pack to withstand the journey (since it’s always hot for the Fair, you can count on it!) We suggest coolers, and packing around the projects so that they won’t get battered in transit.

Get wild and crazy
We appreciate the value of hard work, and are grateful for an attractively arranged plate of vegetables that a child has grown for the first time, don’t misunderstand us. But feel free to play with horticulture this year! Claudia Hitt, the horticulture superintendent says, “I just love the pressed flower pictures, the dried flower plaques – and I would really like to see more!” Marcia Eames-Sheavly, the youth program leader for Cornell Garden-Based Learning, is hoping to see lots of veggie art, as well as some cool living sculpture projects entered in the open class – photo essays would be terrific for those projects you cannot bring along to Fair. Help us breathe life into horticulture in the youth building!

Some counties offer unique special projects such as garden record books. Our special challenge to youth who use the same garden for multiple record books will be to cultivate your own little patch of garden – show us in images how your approach is special, and ‘all your own,’ a little bit different from your siblings.

Let’s work together to ensure a positive and rewarding experience for everyone this year. Evaluators are willing to work with young people – in fact, they welcome the chance to talk with them, and with our county educators, too. This summer, please make a special effort to communicate with our horticulture evaluators, and promote communication between them and the children and youth from your counties.