

Ask the Experts: Exhibiting Dahlias for 2026 CSDS Show



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

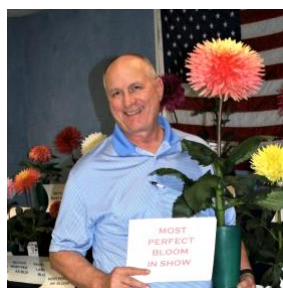
Growers may differ on the exact techniques they employ in growing dahlias, and each grower hones their own successful practices over time. Your choices may differ if you're growing for your own enjoyment versus growing for show, and there is no right or wrong answer if you're pleased with your results! 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.

In this column, we explore the topic of timing when growing for show and how Jim Kassner and Rusty Ritchie - both veterans (and award recipients) of countless dahlia shows - prepare their dahlias for their time in the spotlight.

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



Rusty Richie: 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 21st 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 2004, 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

How does an exhibitor know what section they should enter their blooms in?

Jim Kassner: The section you should enter your AA – BB blooms in is based on several factors:

- Number of hills. A dahlia "hill" is one plant irrespective of the number of shoots growing directly from the ground. If planting is done so there are two plants to the stake, this counts as two hills and not one. To determine your section, count the number of AA, A, B, and BB hills you planted.
- Years of experience exhibiting dahlias in competition. If you have exhibited for 3 years or less and grow no more than 60 hills of AA - BB dahlias, then you qualify for Section W, Novice.
- Amateur vs professional. If you employ professional help or grow dahlias to sell as a business, then you must compete in Section E.
- Use of cloth enclosure. If you use a framework to which you attach or suspend shade material which covers the top and all or part of the sides, then you must compete in Section E.
- Age. If you are 16 or younger as of January 1, then you should compete in Section S, Juniors.

Otherwise, your section is based on the number of AA – BB hills counted when you planted:

A: 1 – 30 hills, B: 31 – 60 hills, C: 61 – 120 hills, D: 121 or more, E: open to all.

For any single or multiple smaller blooms or multiple large blooms, everyone exhibits in the same section (starting with Section F). For more rules and specifics (including which sections you can enter undisseminated blooms and seedlings), see the [2026 Show Schedule](#).

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

Jim Kassner: Two weeks before a show I start to look at buds and look for color. I also refer to the bottom section of the Timing our Blooms for Fall Shows chart (developed by John Thiermann) to have an idea when I can expect to see blooms. 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 6 - 8 laterals.

(Editor's note: Download Thiermann's spreadsheet from the [CSDS resource page](#) and edit with dates of your shows. Another great resource is Southtown Dahlia Club's [When Will My Dahlias Open?](#))



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



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?

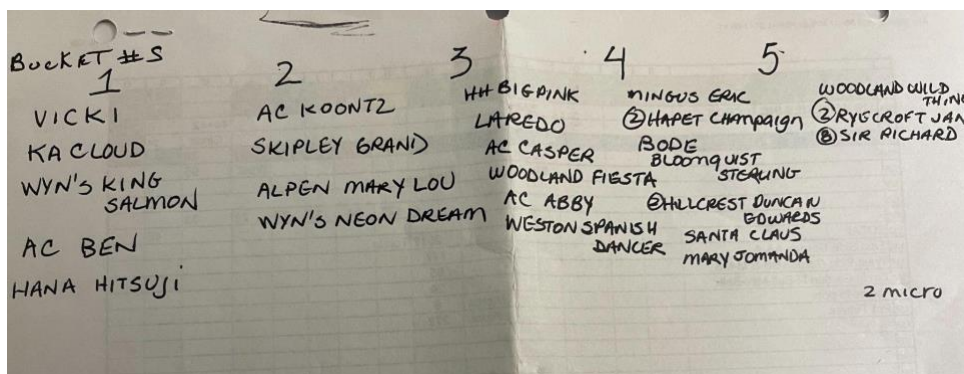
Rusty Ritchie: For most dahlia shows, I cut on Friday morning. By 10:00 am I call it quits. Large blooms go into buckets that might hold four to six blooms. I use oasis blocks to help anchor the stems, and then I secure the stem at the top of the bucket. I use the coldest water I can to soak the oasis. 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 on Wednesday or Thursday night as well if I have a lot of blooms or I have to travel. I also put about two inches of hot tap water in 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 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 immediately below the receptacle. The foliage should look proportionate to the bloom.



Jim's bloom-filled buckets staying cool inside.
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.



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

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?



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

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. When transporting blooms, Dad always said, "Drive like you are driving on ice." Nuff said?

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 I use a spray bottle to mist the foliage to keep them hydrated. I have a rule that once I depart for the show, I never look back in my vehicle to see how the blooms are doing!

What supplies will be provided by Central States Dahlia Society at the show?

CSDS will provide:

- Vases. Our standard containers are green plastic vases which come in 3 sizes. For micros, we will provide shot glass green solo cups to use. Triple micros will be staged in green 12-ounce solo cups. Do not bring your own vases or frogs / pins for staging blooms.
- Oasis. Blocks of oasis saturated with water will be available.
- Vase lids that have a hole in the middle that can be used to keep blooms upright.
- Wooden wedges can be pushed into the oasis to provide additional stability.
- Show tags and the wooden stick to attach. Show tags will be available at check-in so exhibitors can fill tags out in advance.
- Stickers to place on a tag to indicate if a variety qualifies as a Current Year United States New Introduction.

[Watch this video](#) to see CSDS member Kevin Maloney demonstrate his method for efficiently cutting oasis for the three different sizes.

What supplies should be in every exhibitor's tool kit?

In Jim Kassner's kit:

- Clippers
- Sharp knife with 5" blade (e.g., filet knife)
- Razor knife
- Cutting board
- Tweezers
- Paper towels
- Spray bottle with canola oil (to clean leaves)
- Shallow tray (e.g. jelly roll pan with edges to prevent water from spills when cutting oasis)
- Show tags*

*To save time and to be better organized on show day, Jim prefers to have his show tags prepped in advance. He credits his wife Debbe for supporting him in all things dahlia such as prepping show tags as well as making almost 1000 name tags for his blooms during his career. Debbe has also participated and won awards in the floral design section of past shows and is currently a candidate judge, studying to be an accredited judge. Among her long list of accomplishments in the dahlia world, Debbe has clerked about 30 shows all over the country! (I think she might be a bit overqualified to prep show tags!)

In Rusty Ritchie's exhibitor's kit:

- Cutting board
- Knife
- Spray bottle
- Paper towels
- Band-aids
- Pens
- Address labels
- Show tags
- ADS Classification book
- Show program

And if you are judging:

- Calipers
- Measuring tape
- Color guide
- Composite classification book
- Sense of humor



TIPS FOR SHOWING DAHLIAS



1. READ THE RULES

CSDS prints a booklet of official show rules with info on eligibility, sections for entries and awards.

2. GROW GREAT BLOOMS

Top, disbud, disbranch and time your dahlias for peak bloom at show time. Pick strong, healthy, pest free blooms true to form, color and size.





3. CUT AND PREP

Cut evening before or early morning on day of show. Keep at least 1 set of leaves. Keep cool and secure in transport buckets.

4. PACK A TOOLKIT

Cutting tools, cutting board, shallow tray, tweezers, paper towels, canola oil, spray bottle, pens, show tags, ADS Classification book





5. STAGE YOUR BLOOMS

Secure bloom in vase. Check foliage and use canola oil to clean leaves. Mist if needed. Tag and place on section exhibition table by 9am.

for more show-winning tips check out

CENTRAL STATES DAHLIA SOCIETY NEWS-LINE

"ASK THE EXPERTS"

www.centralstatesdahliasociety.com

A handy dandy summary of our experts' best tips! Graphic and photo credit: Vida Wu

What are judges looking for in an award-worthy bloom?

Jim Kassner:

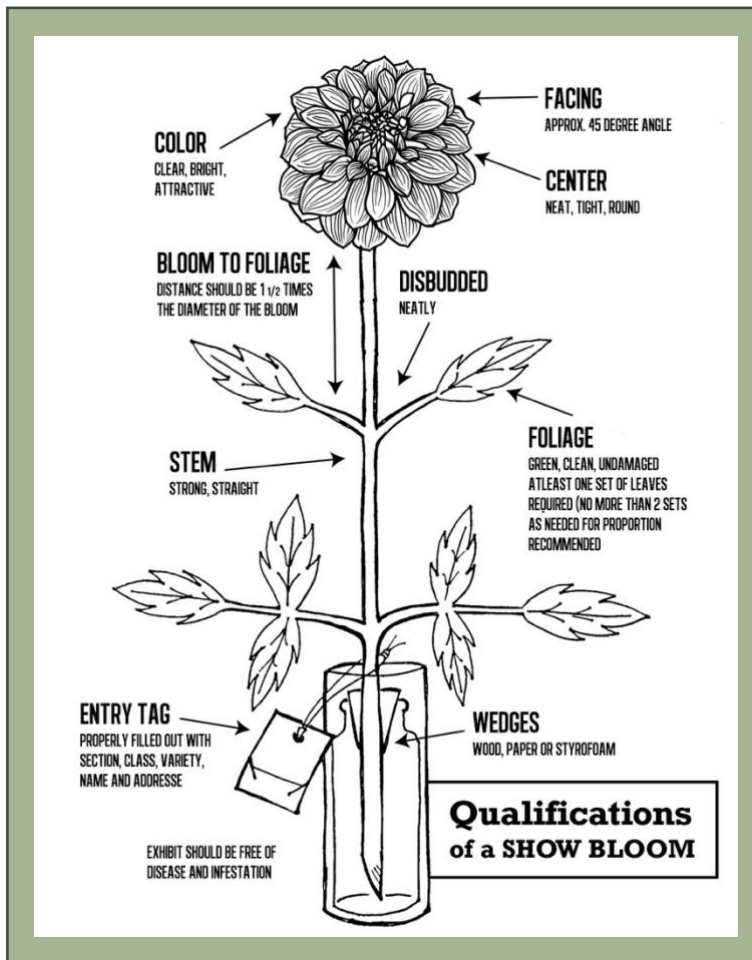


Diagram reprinted with permission from Ben Smaby of the Minnesota Dahlia Society

Form: A dahlia should be true to form. A “Formal Decorative” dahlia for example should conform to the standards for a dahlia of that classification. (*For more details see [Dahlia Forms and Sizes](#) from the American Dahlia Society website.*) Dahlias with blown centers (where you can see the pollen in the middle of the bloom when at an arm’s length distance) will be disqualified. You want to have the bloom be perfectly open (not partially open and not over “ripe” / blown center).

Color: The petals should not be streaky or faded. They should also be full and not droopy.

Leaves: The top pair of leaves is required, and all leaves must show above the vase’s rim. The foliage should be clean and proportional to the bloom. You do not want a giant bloom with alligator arms (short and skinny) but rather proportioned like a pyramid where the leaves spread in a pleasant and balanced presentation. The first pair of leaves is mandatory. Often, I leave two sets of leaves on a lot of my blooms and about 12 to 24 inches of stem

where possible, but the second or third pair of leaves is not required.

Stem: The stem should be straight from the first pair of leaves and up. The bloom position should be 45 degrees atop the stem. For balls, poms and minis the judges are not as harsh on bloom position. Overall, the bloom should have a striking presentation.

Your bloom will be compared to the same variety or other similar varieties in the same section.

Rusty Ritchie: If you are bringing blooms to show, cut the stem long enough that you have one or two sets of foliage. The judges will send only the best entries to the ‘Court of Honor’. The blooms that make it to the top usually have nice foliage and sturdy stems, not to mention striking blooms that have great symmetry and little or no bug damage.

What considerations or strategies do you take into account when deciding what category to enter your blooms?



Rusty and Anita's garden blooms awaiting their debut during show season. Photo credit: Rusty and Anita Ritchie

Rusty Ritchie: I consider a dahlia show to be an exhibition more than a competition. I like to bring one of everything, and those require no strategy or decision making. Multiple bloom entries take a little more effort and thought, but they make a bigger impression on the visitors to the show. Multiple bloom entries are where shows often differ. In Elkhart, any variety can be entered as a single bloom, or a group of three, five, or ten. In Chicago, the numbers are different. (CSDS has a single, three, six and ten grouping and a special "Four Formation" section among other categories.)



Above: Laura Matz's award-winning "Three of a Kind" of AC MP. Below: Jim's award-winning three-bloom entry of Clearview Edie. Photo credit: Vida Wu

Jim Kassner: Absolutely there are many reasons to enter other parts of the show. It does take some strategy coupled with experience and some thoughts on what you decide to plant in spring. I entered 100 blooms at Central States with most going to Section E ("open to all exhibitors"). There were duplicates of blooms that could have been entered as "triples". I did enter three sets of triples, in three different sections and won all three: "Best Triple Miniature," "Best Triple A," and "Best Triple AA". Those were entered in Sections G ("Miniatures"), and the other two were both from Section I ("Three of a Kind").

Section J would be nice to enter with six different AA/A or B or BB staged in separate vases. I have entered Section K ("Ten Single Bloom Entries") in the past. It requires ten AA/A or B or BB all staged in separate vases. Section M ("Four Formations") is 4 AA/A or B or BB - one bloom from 4 of the 6 possible forms.

Section V ("Multiple Bloom Classes Open") is for the same varieties in a common vase in the amount of 5, 10, or 20. Entering in the multiples sections takes more effort, experience and overall knowledge. I was disappointed in myself for not doing more multiples in past years. My last thoughts are on becoming a better exhibitor. I scored 180 points in my section, almost double of what it takes to win any section, so I should have planned better to enter other sections.



What information goes on a show tag?

Jim Kassner:

You will need to know the names of your dahlia varieties. Refer to the [ADS Online Classification Guide \(OCG\)](#) or printed handbook version to look up the cultivar's four-digit number and write it next to Class. I highly recommend that look up and write down the class numbers of all your varieties before you get to staging.

The class number tells you the size, form and color of a variety. For example, the cultivar 'Hollyhill Big Red' has a class number of 0207. "0" means size AA, "2" means the form is semi-cactus, "07" means the color is Dark Red.

Now that you know the bloom's size and form, confirm where to place your bloom. Use the [2026 Show Schedule](#) to determine the section it should be placed.

If your variety is not in the Classification Guide, then place your bloom on the classification table so a team of judges can determine its appropriate class. Exhibitors are responsible for moving their blooms from the classification table to the appropriate show table.

In the flap (not shown), write your name or business name. CSDS does not use exhibitor numbers. If you are not a member, also write your address so prize money can be mailed to you if you win!



Sample show tag. Photo credit: Vida Wu

What tips do you have for the actual staging of your bloom?

Jim Kassner:

- Select a vase with oasis and water. Choose a vase appropriate for the size of the bloom.
- Insert the bloom with the bloom facing you. Make sure the stalk is straight and not leaning.
- Examine the foliage. Clean the foliage with water and canola oil. Decide if one, two, or three sets of leaves improves the overall appearance of the bloom. Triangulate from the top of the bloom to the outside edges of the foliage. If the foliage is overpowering the bloom, you should remove the extra foliage and leave the mandatory single set of leaves.
- Place the show tag to hide any conspicuous wedges of oasis you may have used or any unsightly parts of the stalk.
- When you set your bloom down in its section, look for tags on the table to place it in the correct numeric portion of the section. There should be blooms similar to yours on the table which will give you an idea if you are in the right place!
- Ask questions of others. Everybody is there to assist and appreciates your efforts to exhibit.
- If possible, attend a show prior to entering for some in-person experience.
- Make sure blooms are on table by 9:45 am!

Rusty Ritchie:

- When staging your blooms, use the tools at hand to make sure your bloom is secure in the container.
- Wedges can help keep your bloom upright.
- Recutting the stem can help if the bloom seems to be getting wimpy.
- Misting the bloom lightly - and foliage too - can help it stay fresh.

Still feeling overwhelmed?

Jim Kassner:

Keep in mind that Rusty and I have decades of show experience behind us — new dahlia growers shouldn't feel daunted by all this.

I encourage all members to show their dahlias. Newbies can start out by manicuring a few plants to see the difference firsthand and to learn the basics of disbudding and lateral management for good overall plant health. Bring a few blooms and join in the fun! Who knows, you might win some money too!

[Watch this video](#) by Sue Fitzgerald for similar advice. She created it in 2023 so the dates are not current, but the information is still valuable.

A big thank you to this month's experts Rusty Ritchie and Jim Kassner.

Original 2023 column edited by Vida Wu and Sonia Harmon. Updated column for 2026 edited by Sonia Harmon.