

Cut Leaf Pandemonium

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The date of the cut-leaf show has been highlighted on your calendar for weeks or maybe even months. Plaguing questions have been exploding in your mind: Is the show going to be too early or too late for my area? Will my plants be immature or will they be past their prime? Will a late frost damage the first leaves, which are usually the largest? Can those greedy slugs be thwarted? Will May bring its usual exasperating and destructive hail storms? While worrying about the answers, be sure and take the time to request your entry cards from the show chairperson. After the cards arrive, use any spare time that is left over from worrying, to fill in your name and address on the appropriate lines. As the season progresses, try to make some preliminary selections of varieties that you might like to show.

The day for cutting prize-winning leaves finally arrives. The sky is clear and the sun is bright enough to see even the smallest of holes in a hosta leaf. You hope the plants have survived the past night without a limb (or twig, for that matter) falling on your prize selection. Get up and out, it's time to start. Don't worry about missing your regular morning exercise routine. Just be ready for a real workout as the day unfolds. First, dig around in the closet and pull out a nice deep container(I prefer to use a bucket with a bail to simplify the carrying). Put water into the container. Next, search among your cutlery for a sharp, lightweight knife. A red handle enhances your chances of finding the often-misplaced scalpel. With these two pieces of equipment in hand, it is time to gather the labeling materials. I suggest a Sharpie ultra fine point permanent marker along with a roll of masking tape. Unless you are a real expert, it is wise and even necessary to label each leaf as soon as it is cut. Last, but certainly of great importance, be sure that your bifocals are sparkling clean. Be armed with the above essentials, it is time to march into the hosta beds.

Your bifocals or, in some cases, your very expensive trifocals now have an opportunity to prove their worth as you scrutinize the first clump of a hosta to select the leaves that are typical in size, shape and color for that specific variety. Your goal is to find one leaf of perfect symmetry, with excellent color and no blemishes. Now the calisthenics begin. To find that perfect leaf, get down on your knees, bend over, move from side to side, reach out and lift the leaf for closer inspection. Continue those gymnastics until you discover a leaf that looks acceptable. Get up and search for the certain-to-be-misplaced knife. Then it's time to bend the back, reach into the clump to sever the petiole at its base. Stand up and hold the leaf between you and the light. Two pin holes! It's back down on the knees for a second try. After failing the third or fourth time, I usually move on to a new clump expecting better luck.

Once a selection has been harvested, plunge it into the container of water. Be sure to complete the identification tag and wrap it around the petiole. Success at last! Certainly you feel like celebrating, but now is not the time for a coffee break. Having finally gotten the knack of things, you are ready to venture forth to conquer other candidates.

Once the leaf collection is complete, it is cleaning time. A large basin of cold water with some mild dissolving liquid soap makes a good cleaning solution for the leaves. Cotton balls and swabs aid in removing dirt from the petioles and any creases or indentations on the leaves. The above works wonderfully well for green and gold leaves but **do not** wash the so called blue leaves. Washing destroys the surface bloom that provides the blue color. With the bloom gone, you have a green leaf which is not typical for that variety. If I ever learn how to clean a blue leaf so that it still looks blue, I plan to exhibit a minimum of thirty in the next show.

By the time all of the leaves are picked and cleaned, you probably feel the need for a long soaking bath, which is exactly what your leaves must have. Fill the bathtub about halfway with cold water and submerge the leaves for several hours. Don't sigh with relief now; there is still work to be done. While the leaves are resting in that wonderful tub of water, a method must be devised for transporting the precious cargo to the show location. Select a box that will fit on the floor behind the front seat of your car. Then rummage through that closet again. This time select several different sizes of jars or bottles that will hold your leaves and will also fit in your box. Large leaves need support from tall jars but small leaves travel well in low ones which will often fit between the larger leaves. Next you need crushed newspaper to pack between the jars. It is important that they do not turn over or slide about during the trip. Have you had your exercise today? Well, rest while filling in each variety name on an entry card.

It is morning already and time to hit the road. Pack your leaves by selecting those of similar size and shape so that one will fit into another. This method takes less room and helps protect the product during transport. A tape around a group of petioles holds them secure as they are placed into the containers of water.

Now you and your leaves are on the way. RELAX? NOT YET! Beware of stopping the car in a sunny place. Keep your eyes open for a cool shady place to park your car when you stop for garden visits, shopping or just having lunch. Fresh hosta leaves do make an excellent salad as well as good show material but steamed or fried, they tend to lose their appeal.

Traveling more than one day seems to be detrimental to the leaves. They often will not be of the same quality on show day as they were when removed from the bathtub at home. If you are lucky enough to have a hotel room with a tub that holds water, you might want to give them another few hours of rest and relaxation in it.