

Vegetables BEYOND THE GARDEN

by **Caddy Sitwell**

*The Horticultural Show. Part Two:
Showers and Growers “Are we mad, daft or stupid?”*

Whilst training to be a vegetable judge I had fallen into the delightful realm of the Horticultural Show. Growers and showers at all levels gently welcomed me to their craft, sharing tips and tales. But occasionally, very occasionally the competitive tension can bubble out—especially at staging time.

In 2021 a frazzled woman was heard through the canvas at the Melplash Show shouting at her long-suffering husband, “lay those peas out properly or I’ll thwack you round the head with this cucumber”. She meant it. She really meant it. It’s hard work growing, transporting and staging perfect show vegetables. That was in fact the only year she entered but it certainly takes a particular temperament to become a ‘shower’. It requires patience and a methodical commitment to perfectionism—having a practical nature with a dose of ‘allotment style’ thrift can help enormously.

Some vegetables need both dawn and dusk visits, with staking and tweaking throughout the summer. Timing is key and a careful succession of seed sowing is needed to ensure peak condition on show day. For instance, cauliflowers take between 14 and 16 weeks to grow and are notoriously only ‘right’ for two days. They are quick to ‘blow’ into frothy curds so a batch is sown every ten days to try and compensate for the vagaries of the weather. A Cornishman told me he grows 2000 pickling shallots to give him the best chance of finding a matching set of twelve and the reigning stump carrot champion grows 104 carrots from which he hopes to find ten good ones.

Vegetable growing was traditionally seen as the man’s domain with flowers left to the ‘ladies’ but not so any more with Sherie Plumb of Essex being regarded as possibly the best show potato grower in England. Her husband and children are all involved in showing and I’m told grow 400 bags of potatoes annually. A helpful family is an invaluable asset and is surprising how many partners can be sucked into this world—shocked to find themselves balancing French beans or tomatoes on their laps in the back of the already rammed, show-bound car.

At top shows the vegetables themselves are often not normal, they are grown from special seeds in highly controlled environments, with regularised watering, temperatures and soil mixes. Three-foot parsnips can be grown in oil barrels, leeks are



First Prize for Sherie Plumb’s show potatoes

blanched by daily wrapping in plumber’s insulation or brown paper and onions the size of your head should, it is said, traditionally be sown on Christmas day. This could well be a ‘traditional’ ploy to get out of the washing up, as also I presume, was the ‘necessity’ of preparing carrot barrels on Boxing Day. But size is not the goal. Old school growers in fact dismiss the ‘giant veg’ world as bringing the subject into disrepute and an Americanisation—the goal for them is a perfect matching set, in peak condition, never tasted but creepily perfect.

Rows and rows of these perfect carrots or tomatoes or beans stretching into the distance are surreal and at first glance it seems an impossible task to differentiate between them. The RHS Horticultural Show handbook has, luckily, a pointing system and detailed advice to guide the judge on the different attributes sought in every vegetable. Cauliflowers for example require a ‘creamy white curd that sits well in the hand’ or celery needs to be ‘blemish free, clean, well-blanched’, tomatoes must be ‘shapely, ripe but firm’ and blanched leeks should have ‘long barrels with no sign of softness or splits, a tight button and be free from bulbing and ribbiness’.

As vegetables have their idiosyncrasies so do the showing community and I suggest that a similar range of characters exists today as in its Victorian heyday. There are the showers who chase the cups and money known as ‘pot hunters’, the hopeless optimists who keep entering but never learning and a wealth of keen, self-taught horticulturists. My respect for successful growers is boundless, especially as year after year has seen me failing to master the twenty pointer ‘long carrot’. They often have to put up with the ubiquitous patronising amusement and ribaldry but total focus on growing exceptional vegetables is no joke. It can be obsessive, totally consuming and take over your summer, but it’s certainly not madness.



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