

Plan Now For Entries to the County Fair

By Hattie Braun

For many people, the Coconino County Fair brings up memories of fair food, animals, rides, and lots of fun. For others, it's a competition and a chance to bring home a blue ribbon and bragging rights for prize-worthy vegetables and flowers. Now is the time to start planning and planting.

The Agriculture & Horticulture Building and the Floriculture Building at the county fair showcase the best of Coconino County growers. Ribbons are awarded for the best tomatoes, most beautiful dahlia, largest squash and even the freakiest looking vegetable. Every time I'm in the horticulture or floriculture buildings, I'll hear someone say "My roses look better than that. I should have entered." So how about entering those beauties in the 2023 fair?! This is a great opportunity for you, as a home grower, to show our community what can be grown in Coconino County.

Here are some tips for competing for a blue ribbon.

Get a copy of the Fair Book, then read and follow the rules. The book is available online at: <https://www.coconinocountyfair.com/entries>. Everything you need to know about entering is in it. You can print paper entry forms or enter online.

Make a list of each class you have an entry for. You may not know what will look great in your garden in late August, but you can enter everything you might want to show. If your vegetables or flowers don't produce as well as you expected, you won't be obligated to show them.

Make sure you enter your flowers and vegetables in the right class. Your entries will be judged compared to other entries in the class. And there is only one entry per person per class, but there are lots of classes.

If the class states 'any other variety named,' you must include the variety name on your entry form. So, keep those plants tags in a place where you can find them come August.

Follow the rules. The Fair Book states how many, what size, and how each item should be presented. It's hard if you have four of the best-looking tomatoes but the fair book says you need to enter five. If you don't have enough, it's better to pass on entering them and enjoy eating them instead. And if the fair book says that small marigolds should be less than 1 ½" in size, measure before you enter. Judges carry a ruler and will measure and disqualify if necessary.

Consistency is something judges are looking for. When a class requires multiple zinnias or peppers, make sure that everything is around the same size, same maturity, and same quality.

Select entries that are blemish-, insect- and disease-free. You want to enter flowers, fruits, or vegetables that you would not only buy in the store or at the farmers' market, but also eat.

Bigger is not always better except for the largest squash or pumpkin. If that radish is large and woody, would you buy it at the market? If not, it isn't likely a great entry. Maybe try the largest radish category instead.

Don't wait until the last minute to complete the entry process. We all know the internet is great until things crash and then it's not. Give yourself a little extra time. This also gives the fair folks the opportunity to answer your questions about entries.

If you get hit with a late August hailstorm and your prized dahlias are trashed, you don't have to enter them. Maybe we should have a new category called 'Best bedraggled flowers and vegetables that survived the hail.'

Don't forget the deadlines. Entry forms are due for Floriculture and Agriculture & Horticulture on Friday, August 18. Ag & Hort entries are received at the Ag & Hort Building on Wednesday, August 30 from 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. For Floriculture, it's the following day, August 31, from 2 p.m. to 6 p.m. And volunteers are needed. Email Fair@coconino.az.gov if you can help. You'll receive two one-day passes for each 4-hour volunteer shift.

The Coconino County Fair is held every Labor Day Weekend. This year it's September 1 through 4 at Fort Tuthill County Park. Exhibitors showing five or more entries in one department will receive a single one-day free admission to the fair.

Fair entries don't end with vegetables and flowers. Fruit, eggs, and herbs are also included, and then there are the food entries. Maybe someone will ask me to judge the desserts this year!

Hattie Braun is the Coconino Master Gardener Program Coordinator and County Director for Coconino Cooperative Extension.