The National Junior Horticultural Association-Developing Horticultural Skills and Knowledge through the Horticulture Contest

The National Junior Horticultural Association (NJHA) was established in 1935 as an organization dedicated to developing the knowledge and horticultural and leadership skills of youth in the United States. This purpose is accomplished through projects, contests, workshops, and other activities at the NJHA annual convention (Fountain, 1991), rather than through a sequential program where youth advance from one project to another (Table 1).

In the past decade more than 200 youth have participated in the NJHA Horticulture Contest, making this the largest segment of the NJHA convention on. The contest consists of competition in three sections: judging, identification, and a written test on horticultural principles and practices. Four major horticultural commodity areas (fruits and nuts, vegetables and herbs, woody ornamentals and turf, and floriculture) are covered in each section of the contest. The list of specimens to be identified and judged is taken from a predetermined list of 45 items in each of the four commodities. Judging classes are ranked top to bottom based on quality. Unlike animal science judging contests, the participants are not required to explain why one ring is ranked higher or lower than another in the same class. Questions for the written test are taken from U.S. Dept. of Agriculture and extension publications throughout the country or written by NJHA adult leaders. This information is part of a manual available from the NJHA executive secretary.

Youth participating in the horticulture contest come from various backgrounds and experiences. As a result, it is necessary to have contest divisions for individuals and teams in 4-H or Future Farmers of America (FFA), those not involved with either organization (open division), and those who have placed first as an individual or team member (honors division).

The 4-H division of the NJHA contest serves as the national horticulture judging

contest for 4-H members between the ages of 14 and 19 (by 1 Jan. of the activity year). These individuals are selected through a 4-H competition at the state level. Only one 4-H team consisting of three or four individuals may represent a state's 4-H program. (The lowest individual score is dropped for teams of four.) Individuals who have previously competed in any NJHA contest division are ineligible to compete in the 4-H division.

The number of individuals and/or teams from each state in the FFA, open, and honors divisions is limited. These participants are allowed to compete annually until they are 22 years old or until they have placed first in the honors division. Other rules relating to this contest may be obtained from W.M.F. or R.R. or your state leader for NJHA.

Judging and identification contests are an integral part of youth programming for organizations such as 4-H, FFA (Staten and Jones, 1951), American Landscape Contractors of America, Boy Scouts of America, and The National Intercollegiate Flower Judging Contest. These organizations recognize that competitive activities are a way for individuals to obtain long-term skills and values.

All judging contests emphasize the quality and economic value of a product (Barrett, 1970). The NJHA Horticulture Contest seeks to: 1) foster an interest in horticulture; 2) provide youth with experience with horticultural products; and 3) develop judging skills. The contest is educational. It gives youth a direct sensory experience with horticultural products. The outstanding coach will combine the identification section with history. World history is steeped in the lore of horticulture: wars were fought over control of the spice trade; early exploration of Asia and the Americas was undertaken in search of novelties for European hothouses; and pestilence resulted in changes in population centers, customs, and national governments. Finally, the participant must learn to make accurate comparisons and observations on quality and identification. Skills developed in judging are used daily by each member of society.

As students work with other team members, they confront differences of opinion and develop skills in compromising that are necessary in working with others. Through the study process, they become more skilled at recognizing detail and develop confidence in expressing potentially controversial opinions (Wolnick, 1989).

From selecting what to have for lunch to making informed business decisions, the abil-

ity to identify a product and make quick, informed judgments about quality is an essential skill in life. Our personal and professional success can be a direct result of decision-making skills that were learned in a judging and identification contest. The NJHA Horticulture Contest offers the best opportunity for junior high and high school youth to hone these talents in the plant sciences. At the same time, the student develops an appreciation for the diversity of horticultural products and services and develops a better understanding of quality; thus, he/she becomes a better consumer of these products.

Youth must develop certain skills to excel in judging contests. While aided by a coach, it is ultimately the youth that must be motivated to develop skill in: 1) knowing and understanding plants; 2) forming a mental image of ideal types; 3) forming a keen sense of observation; 4) interpreting and incorporating plant science data in problem solving; 5) recognizing and evaluating horticultural products for condition, quality, uniformity, true-to-typeness, and size; and 6) thinking quickly, accurately, and independently.

Development of these skills is not limited to proficiency in the plant sciences (Hunsley and Beeson, 1988) and frequently results in adept youth excelling in multiple subjects. The animal sciences have a more extensive series of judging events than the plant sciences. This makes individuals trained in judging animals particularly attractive recruits for horticulture teams.

Development of skills in judging should not be approached as an end in itself; rather, it is a means to an end. Introduction to the abundance of horticultural products will allow any student to become a better consumer. The student that chooses a career in horticulture

Table 1. Projects sponsored by NJHA.

Achievement and leadership recognition project (Armstrong Scholarship)
Demonstration contests
Production
Marketing
Use
Artistic arrangement
Landscaping
Special division
Speech contests
Illustrated talk
Speech
Extemporaneous speaking
Special division
Environmental beautification project report
Experimental horticulture
Production and marketing project report
Horticulture contest
Scottish Gardening Scholarship
Photography contest
Young America horticulture project reports
Gardening
Plant propagation
Environmental beautification
Experimental horticulture
Poster contest

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will learn to make better marketing and cultural decisions. This is especially important at a time when consumers of horticultural products and services are becoming increasingly sophisticated and the industry is expanding internationally.

A judging contest must reflect the standards of excellence for that industry. In return, judging contests reinforce industry standards. Without standards, producers would have their own ideas of perfection. They would believe that their products were superior and set no higher goals for themselves. A horticulture judging contest that uses material better suited for the compost pile reinforces the erroneous assumption that any product, even one of questionable value, can be marketed.

Visits to florists, nurseries, and produce terminals expand the experience and knowledge of the student. The chance to meet other students in friendly rivalry is beneficial in maintaining a cordial relationship between different states and educational institutions. Success in contests gives a program prestige that is beneficial in public relations. For horticulture students, contests give purpose to academic classes and stimulate interest and enthusiasm in their studies.

The contest should allow the participant and the coach to reach their capabilities. In brief, each activity should be an educational experience for the participants. It should not permit the individual(s) organizing the contest to show how much he/she knows and how little the participant knows. A portion of the well-organized contest should introduce horticultural products of new colors, shapes and fragrances. Development of skills in identification will be a valuable lifelong skill. To solve any problem one must first be able to recognize the subject.

The use of the contest as a teaching tool is maximized by inviting public inspection once the contestants have finished. All of the samples should be identified and the judging classes indicated. If the number of participants is below 40, a leader talks briefly about each sample. Introduction of trivial information about the product is appropriate at this point. In addition to being educational and building parental support, it allows a team of graders to finish their job without the participants becoming impatient.

Good organization on the part of the individual or team charged with setting up the contest is essential. Disorganization will result in frustration and a contest that is poorly attended in future years. Good organization requires that all materials be in hand before the contest. It is also advantageous to have backup entries for the judging and identification classes. This gives the organizer latitude in selecting material representative of the species (Fountain, 1992).

The use of lap-top computers to aid in scoring the Kentucky 4-H Horticulture Contest reduced the number of individuals scoring papers from 12 to three and the time required in half (Fountain, 1989). This type of program quickly ranks individuals in different divisions and is free of mathematical errors.

The NJHA contest project chair is appointed by the national program chair. The project chair appoints a committee to assist in setting up the contest and scoring the results. Committee members are selected for their expertise in a commodity. In addition to overseeing the smooth operation of the contest, the project chair mediates disputes arising over contest entries and answers questions from contestants or coaches. The committee is responsible for collecting samples of a given commodity for judging and identification. To ensure an adequate representation from all regions, they solicit material from throughout the country.

Winning individuals and teams are selected from each of the divisions (4-H, FFA, open, and honors). Each individual receives a plaque, and coaches receive a certificate. The winning open division team is awarded the Snyder Trophy, given in memory of Grant Snyder.

The time and money involved in training a team is a frequent criticism of judging and identification contests. Bringing the base knowledge level of a new participant up to the median level of proficiency of a repeat participant requires many hours, and transporting and supporting a team at a national convention is expensive. Individuals, alumni, industry professional organizations, 4-H, FFA, and state fair boards (Wolnick, 1989) have provided funds to support teams.

Well-organized contests will remain popular with contestants and will be of immense value in reinforcing industry standards, providing educational opportunities, and promoting interest in horticulture. While examinations and lectures remain an important

teaching tool, nothing equals experience. Few activities can equal an identification and judging contest in the principal of learning through doing.

The NJHA horticulture contest is not for everyone. Youth with a curiosity about nature should have the opportunity to nurture and stimulate that interest. Providing interested youth with a wide variety of first-hand experiences is more beneficial to a diverse society than subjecting everyone to the same cookie-cutter learning program. Nothing teaches like experience.

Information on this and other NJHA programs is available in the NJHA Project and Activities Guide for Contestants and Leaders. Single copies may be obtained at no charge from your NJHA state leader or from W.M.F.

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