

VEGETABLES BEYOND THE GARDEN

by **Caddy Sitwell**Click
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this article*The Horticultural Show. Part Three: Packing*

Johnny Town-Mouse was born in a cupboard. Timmie Willie was born in a garden. Timmy Willie was a little country mouse who went to town by mistake in a hamper...

Beatrix Potter.

When the RHS held their legendary Autumn Fruit and Vegetable Show in London a coach drew up at 5 am. It had been driven through the night, arranged by an allotment society on the borders of Cheshire and Derbyshire. Out of it poured bleary-eyed gardeners and padded boxes. Each box had been individually made to transport their prize vegetables and long carrots were brought in their own trunks known as 'coffins'. Next there ensued a chaotic flurry of tissue paper, of hay and straw, of newspaper and string—the air suffused with high tension, exhaustion and excitement until every vegetable was laid in its assigned place. The team of allotmenters retreated for breakfast to return after judging. Winners or losers, they cheerfully piled back in the bus and 'up north' again they went. It was great sight—dedicated growers who are sorely missed from the show that moved to Essex

Another great rivalry at this show that started in the 1950s was with the dukes and their grapes. Latterly the Duke of Devonshire and The Duke of Marlborough were the main contenders, and it was with enormous pride and trepidation that the Muscat and Black Hamburg grapes were packed and brought down to London from Chatsworth. The fruits were suspended at a 45-degree angle on a 12 inch board in a large egg-carrying box. They were 'never to be let out of anyone's sight': nursed down by train or driven by the chauffeur. Not to waste space, herbs wrapped in sphagnum moss (collected from the moors) were tucked in the gap to try their luck at the show too.

Whatever the distance, the run up to a horticultural show needs planning; the produce you have nurtured must be cleaned, packed and tenderly transported to the show ground in pristine condition. No fat fingerprints on the pea's bloom, no scrub marks on the potatoes, no aphids on the tomatoes and no slugs lurking in the celery.

These are not dissimilar expectations from a Cook in a great house. A daily message would be sent to the Head Gardener from the kitchen as to what was needed. It was the under-gardener's job to ensure the vegetables were presented in their best state, clean and pest free. Mid-morning these trugs of washed beets or beans, carrots or 'saladings' would be trundled up



First Prize for a Housewife's Trug

to the house in a wheelbarrow, with bunches of curly parsley for garnish and cushioning.

The 'Housewife's Trug' is a favourite show category of mine—reminiscent of the simple pride in presenting something appealing to your mother in the kitchen. Judges still jokingly use this phrase when assessing an exhibit, 'Now would you be happy taking that to 'Mother'?'

Even into the 20th century, large kitchen gardens of great houses could supply the family's town house too, and this is where the packing and wrapping skills of the Head Gardener were really tested. A trunk or large hamper was ingeniously packed: leeks topped and tailed to save space; beans in shallow baskets of wood wool; trimmed bunches of asparagus: small raffia-tied bunches of turnips rolled in moss; tomatoes nestled into punnets of soft paper shavings; figs wrapped in their own leaves and perhaps plums resting on nettles. The hamper was labelled, locked, taken to the train station by pony and cart and thence to London. Another horsedrawn vehicle rattled it over the cobbles to be greeted by kitchen staff who lugged the hamper into the pantry. One can only imagine the glee of unwrapping these fresh, unblemished treasures of the country.

These old packing tricks are useful today when taking exhibits to the show bench. One could resort to bubble wrap and clingfilm but nothing can beat sphagnum moss for moisture and humidity, or a nest of nettles to keep the bloom on one's peas. Raffia is much kinder than binder twine and a bed of hay and hessian is soft enough for any country mouse to fall asleep in.