

One small step for man... one large floristry certificate for me



impress Ms Mavis Cotton, the professional judge?

In my sleepy Hampshire village, the release of the schedule for the annual show is a very big deal. Published months in advance, it leads thereafter to hushed conversations about secret designs and intense speculation about who dares to compete.

Category 13 is the big one: the largest floristry exhibit of the competition; it's small by national floristry competition standards but it still takes some structuring. This year the theme for Category 13 was challenging: "An Exhibit to celebrate the 50th Anniversary of the Apollo 11 moon landing". The last words of the spec were good news: "Accessories may be used" – this means that non-plant material may form part of the exhibit. Phew. Bring on the props.

And so I set to work to create my moon landing in flowers. I needed impact and drama. How to rocket my way to my fifth win? How to entertain the thousand visitors to the show? And most of all, how to

There are many criteria for judging a floristry exhibit. It starts with the mechanics of the piece which should make the exhibit stable but not be visible themselves. My large oasis ball had to be totally covered, so I conditioned my 80 ivory rose heads for 48 hours, open petals reducing gaps. The flowers themselves are judged too so must be at their prime. Nurturing flowers with feed and temperature can feel like baby-sitting but if successful, the flowers will respond with quiet serenity at the show. Impact and innovation are in the eye of the beholder and that's where the fun starts and imagination is welcome. I sprayed star anises silver and wired them individually to wobble like stars orbiting my moon. My backdrop was board, covered in galaxy wrapping paper ordered online. This would make my moon stand out. A water bottle sprayed white to be a rocket was stuffed with bright carnations and an astronaut from eBay was given a flower back-pack.

It was a long 5 hours of flower arranging on the morning of the show. The transportation is always nerve-wracking but not as scary as the moment when one unveils one's interpretation of a theme next to the works of other exhibitors. It's too late to make any changes and one has to graciously withdraw and await the views of the judge. An anxious wait. Creativity being judged. Imagination under scrutiny...

Result: I got Best in Show again. Not just Category 13 but across all flower exhibits in all categories. That includes immaculate home-grown beauties, a myriad of herbs, pretty annuals in vases and old-friend house plants, some of which compete year on year like old friends of the village.

Flowers and well-being

Studies have identified that being around flowers has a positive impact upon mental health. We are all familiar with the feel-good factor of the surprise bouquet. A 2008 study found that bed-ridden patients who had flowers in their rooms felt less anxious. They needed less post-operative care than patients without flowers. Other studies have shown that workers with plants in their offices have increased brain performance and creativity. It has also been proven that putting plants into classrooms and lecture halls increases attendance.

Working with flowers stimulates the senses and reminds one of the intrinsic beauty of nature. My floristry training taught me to appreciate each stem and take time to place it at its best.

To meet deadlines and keep perishable flowers in optimum condition, many florists lack sleep. Timing is crucial and displays can be ruined if made at the wrong time.

For my part, I love standing back from my exhibits, anonymously, listening to the comments of the passers-by after the judge has gone. I have the judge's comments on my certificate but now it's time to hear what the public thinks of my work. I love the gasps and smiles. Older villagers point, children giggle. Flowers bring so much pleasure.

I agree with Luther Burbank, American botanist:

"Flowers always make people better, happier, and more helpful; they are sunshine, food, and medicine to the mind."

Rebecca Lawrence-Bristol