

Flags earned their place aboard boats as the first means of unspoken communication between vessels, and today they endure as our signals, our symbols and our national identification. If we flew them purely for fun, it wouldn't matter to anyone how, when or where they were displayed. But if you think of each flag as a symbol and flag etiquette as the language of flags, then you'll see that flags are not only fun, but also useful, commonsense tools for communication.

Flag etiquette, mired in pomp and ceremony as it is, is really just assurance that we're all speaking the same language. Here's how it's done, according to protocol.

Displaying Flags

The U.S. national flag (50-star) is proper for all U.S. yachts in home waters and foreign ports, without reservation. The practice of yachts flying the U.S. Yacht Ensign is a 19th-century convention that has become popular practice, if not strictly correct.

There is a limit to the number of flags that can be flown in good taste. In home waters, sailboats may fly the U.S. flag or U.S. Yacht Ensign, yacht club burgee and officer's flag or owner's private signal. In foreign waters,














Cruising Foreign Waters

sailboats may fly the U.S. national flag, foreign courtesy flag and yacht club burgee.

Today, the owner absent flag, guest flag, owner's and crew's meal flags are used primarily aboard professionally crewed yachts and not aboard owner-skipped boats. With the exception of International Code Flags, flags should not be strung together nor should they share the same hoist. Flying novelty flags such as the skull and crossbones, cock-tail flag and the Confederate flag, is frowned upon.

The flag of another country should be flown only as a courtesy flag in foreign waters, not at the trip's end to announce all the places one has visited and never to signify one's ethnic heritage. With the exception of a yacht club burgee and officer's flag, flags of strictly American organizations are not customarily flown when in foreign waters. Instead, members of international yachting organizations, such as the Seven Seas Cruising Association or the Slocum Society, may fly the club flag at the masthead in place of a yacht club burgee or at the spreader.

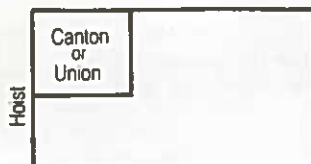
Fly only flags in good condition. It is a sign of disrespect to fly a national flag that is tattered.

How To Display Your Flags					
Flag	Minimum Size	When To Fly	Where To Fly On Single-masted Sailboats	Where To Fly On Boats With Two Or More Masts	
 U.S. National Flag	1" on fly per 1' of overall boat length. Proportion: Hoist = $\frac{2}{3}$ fly	All waters, 0800-sunset	Stern staff when anchored or under way, except when racing ¹	Stern staff when anchored or under way, except when racing ²	
 U.S. Yacht Ensign	Same as above	U.S. waters, 0800-sunset	Same as above	Same as above	
 U.S. Power Squadron Ensign	$\frac{1}{2}$ " on fly per 1' height of tallest mast above water	U.S. waters, 0800-sunset	Starboard spreader	Forwardmost starboard spreader	
 Yacht Club Burgee	Same as above	0800-sunset, or day & night while boat is in commission	Masthead	Forwardmost masthead	
 Club Flag Other Than Yacht Club Burgee	Same as above	0800-sundown, or day & night	Masthead, in lieu of burgee, or at starboard spreader	Masthead, in place of burgee, or at forwardmost starboard spreader	
 Yacht Club Officer's Flag (Rear Commodore)	Same as above	0800-sunset, or day & night while boat is in commission	Masthead, in lieu of yacht club burgee	Aftermost masthead, in lieu of private signal	
 Owner's Private Signal	Same as above	0800-sundown, or day & night	Masthead, in lieu of yacht club burgee	Aftermost masthead	
 Owner Absent Flag	$\frac{1}{2}$ " on fly per 1' overall boat length	Day & night when owner absent	Starboard spreader	Forwardmost starboard spreader	
 Guest Flag	Same as above	Day & night when owner absent and guest in charge	Starboard spreader	Forwardmost starboard spreader in place of Owner Absent Flag	
 "Q" (Quarantine) Flag	Same as above	On arrival, day or night, at foreign port of entry, or first U.S. port of entry	Starboard spreader	Forwardmost starboard spreader	
 Courtesy Flag of foreign nation ³	$\frac{1}{2}$ " on fly per 1' overall boat length	In territorial waters of foreign country after pratique is granted. Fly 0800-sunset	Starboard spreader	Forwardmost starboard spreader	

¹ Alternate location when under sail: From peak if gaff-rigged; on leech, $\frac{2}{3}$ leech length above clew if Marconi-rigged.

² Alternate location when under sail: From aftermost peak if gaff-rigged; on aftermost leech, $\frac{2}{3}$ leech length above clew if Marconi-rigged.

³ Foreign maritime flag or foreign national flag. Because some countries have more than one flag and customs vary, inquire locally.



Fly

Making Colors

Traditionally, a vessel's flags were hoisted at 0800, beginning with the U.S. flag (or yacht ensign), followed by the yacht club burgee, officer's flag and owner's private signal. At precisely sunset or at 2100, whichever is earlier, flags were lowered in the reverse order. In the last decade, this practice known as "making colors" has been relaxed and it is now acceptable to leave all flags except the U.S. flag (or yacht ensign) flying day and night.

The U.S. flag or yacht ensign is always the first flag hoisted and the last flag lowered. If a crewmember is unable to make colors at sunset, the U.S. flag or ensign should be lowered before leaving the boat. It should not be flown while racing.

Chartering

When chartering, the chartered vessel should fly the national flag or ensign of the owner's nationality at the stern staff. It is correct, but optional, to fly the charterer's private signal and/or yacht club burgee.

Signaling Distress

Unofficially, a yacht may signal distress by flying the national flag or ensign upside down. The correctness of the procedure is controversial, but it is widely recognized as a distress signal.

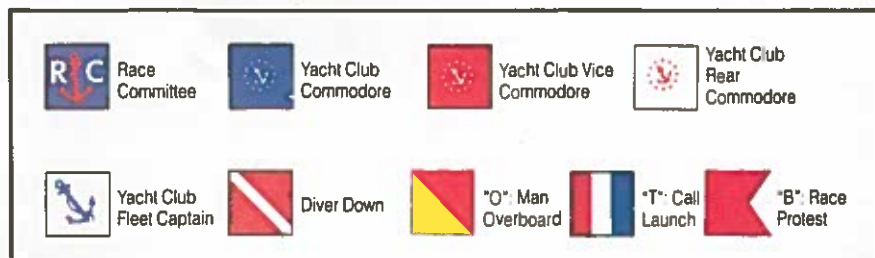
Sailing Overseas

When in international or foreign waters, U.S. vessels should fly the U.S. national flag (50-star) rather than the U.S. yacht ensign at the stern staff. On arrival at the first port of entry of a foreign country or when returning to the United States from a foreign country, fly the Q (quarantine) flag from the forwardmost starboard spreader. Once customs is cleared and pratique granted, lower the Q flag and hoist the courtesy flag in its place if in a foreign country. The preferred courtesy flag to fly is usually the host country's maritime flag (if it has one), however, the national flag is usually acceptable. Check with local officials and follow local customs.

International Code Flags

With the advent of radio communications, International Code Flags are seldom used aboard modern pleasure boats for emergency signaling. More commonly, simple messages are sometimes conveyed by hoisting a single code flag to the spreader to call a launch (T), request pratique (Q) or protest a racing competitor (B). The international code consists of 40 flags: 26 alphabet flags, three repeaters, one answering pennant and 10 numbers. It is a good idea to carry a set of code flags to fit your size boat, for emergency use or just to dress ship on special occasions.

Homeward Bound Pennants



Dressing Ship

Dressing Ship

On national holidays, at regattas and rendezvous, sailboats may hoist the International Code Flags from 0800 to sundown. Dressing ship is done only at anchor, except on a yacht's maiden and final voyage and during special parades, under power. A sailboat should not dress ship under sail. Signal flags are properly displayed from the forward waterline to the aft waterline, attached to the boat at the bow, masthead and stern (or overhanging boom). To produce a varied pattern of colors and shapes the following sequence is recommended, starting from forward: AB2, UJ1, KE3, GH6, IV5, FL4, DM7, PO Third Repeater, RN First Repeater, ST Zero, CX9, WQ8, ZY Second Repeater.

ALPHABET FLAGS				NUMERALS			
A lpha "Diver Down; Keep Clear"		K ilo "Desire to Communicate"		U niform "Standing Into Danger"		1	
B ravo "Dangerous Cargo"		L ima "Stop Immediately"		V ictor "Require Assistance"		2	
C harlie "Yes"		M ike "I am Stopped"		W hiskey "Require Medical Assistance"		3	
D elta "Keep Clear"		N ovember "No"		X ray "Stop Your Intention"		4	
E cho "Altering Course to Starboard"		O scar "Man Overboard"		Y ankee "Am Drag- ging Anchor"		5	
F oxtrot "Disabled"		P apa "About to Sail"		Z ulu "Require A Tug"		6	
G olf "Request Pilot"		Q uebec "Request Pratique"		1st Repeat		7	
H otel "Pilot on Board"		R omeo "Engine Going Astern"		2nd Repeat		8	
I ndia "Altering Course to Port"		S ierra "Engine Going Astern"		3rd Repeat		9	
J uliette "On Fire, Keep Clear"		T anga "Keep Clear of Me"		Code		0	

In the 19th century, merchant ships would sometimes fly from the masthead a light-weight homeward bound pennant on the final leg of a long voyage. Though there was no specified design, the 13-star motif (shown)

was perhaps most common. Typically, the pennant was made from scrap material, one yard long on the fly for each month the vessel had been away from home port. Upon return, the flag was cut and divided among the crew.