

Flag Etiquette

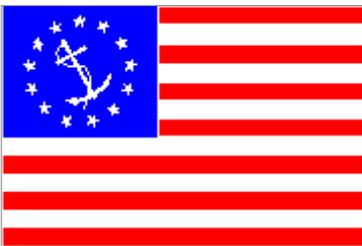
United States Ensign



The U.S. ensign is proper for all U.S. yachts, without reservation. This is "Old Glory," with 50 stars and 13 stripes. All boats, when at anchor, fly it from the stern staff, if so equipped, only while occupied. It is flown from the stern staff of powerboats underway on inland waters. If the powerboat has a mast and gaff, the proper display is at the gaff. On a sports fisherman, where a stern staff would be in the way of the action, the practice is to fly the ensign from a halyard rigged just behind the tuna tower.

On Marconi-rigged sailboats under sail alone, the practice for many years had been to fly the ensign from the leech of the aftermost sail, approximately $\frac{2}{3}$ the length of the leech above the clew. This puts it in about the same position it would occupy if the boat were gaff-rigged, and on gaff-rigged sailboats it is proper to fly the ensign from the peak of the aftermost gaff. The advent of the modern high-aspect-ratio rig, with the boom end well inboard of the stern, has made it possible to fly the ensign from the stern staff of a sailboat underway, and this is now an accepted practice. However, the ensign should never be displayed while the boat is racing. Under power alone, or at anchor or made fast, the ensign should be flown from the stern staff of all sailboats. If an overhanging boom requires that the staff be off center, it should preferably be on the starboard side.

United States Yacht Ensign



This is the 13-star "Betsy Ross" flag with a fouled anchor in the union. Originally restricted to documented vessels of a specific classification, it is now flown on recreational boats of all types and sizes instead of the National Flag. Many yacht clubs now follow bylaws requiring that the Yacht ensign be flown regardless of boat size or documentation status. However, whenever a boat is taken into international or foreign waters, the 50-star U.S. ensign is the proper flag to display and the yacht ensign is **not** to be displayed.

United States Power Squadrons Ensign



The USPS ensign is flown as a signal to others that the boat is commanded by an active member of USPS in good standing. USPS is a national fraternity of boaters dedicated to better and safer boating through education and civic service.

The preferred location for flying the USPS ensign is the starboard yardarm or spreader, underway or at anchor, or made fast to shore, on motor and sailing craft. It may be flown from the stern staff in place of the U.S. or yacht ensign, but this is usually done only on smaller boats that lack a mast. On sailboats underway, it may be flown from the aftermost peak or leech in place of other ensigns.

The USPS ensign may be flown at its proper location on boats displaying the United States Coast Guard Auxiliary ensign to indicate the owner is a member of both organizations; however, it cannot be flown if the craft is under Coast Guard orders.

USPS Squadron Burgee

A distinguishing USPS Squadron burgee, which has been authorized by USPS, may be flown in lieu of a club burgee and from the same positions. This burgee may be flown by day only, or both day and night.

United States Coast Guard Auxiliary Ensign



Known as the "blue ensign," the USCG Auxiliary flag is flown on a boat that has been approved as a "Facility" by the organization for the current year. It is flown both day and night.

On a vessel without a mast, the blue ensign is flown at the bow staff; if there is one mast, it is flown at the masthead. On a vessel with two or more masts, the USCG Auxiliary ensign is displayed at the main masthead. It is never flown in place of the national ensign.

When this ensign is displayed, it is improper to hoist a guest, owner absent, meal, cocktail, or novelty flag.

United States Coast Guard Auxiliary Operational Ensign



The boat of a member of the USCG Auxiliary that meets a particularly high standard of equipment and availability is called an "Operational Facility," and can be called on for use under Coast Guard orders in assistance and patrol missions. When operating under USCG orders, these boats fly the Coast Guard Auxiliary operational ensign — white with the Coast Guard's "racing stripes" of red and blue — in place of the "blue ensign." No other flags are to be flown except the U.S. ensign or appropriate USCG Auxiliary officer flag.

Canadian Power & Sail Squadrons Ensign



A flag frequently seen on the United States northern border is the Canadian Power & Sail Squadrons ensign. While there is no official connection between USPS and CPS, a strong "unofficial bond" does exist.

The CPS ensign is Canadian Power Squadron's counterpart to the USPS ensign.

Yacht Club Burgee

Generally triangular in shape although sometimes swallow-tailed, the yacht club burgee may be flown by day only, or day and night, as determined by the individual yacht club. It is flown from the bow staff of mastless and single-masted motorboats, at the foremost masthead of vessels with two or more masts, and the main masthead of ketches and yawls. The burgee may be flown while underway (but not racing) and at anchor. You may substitute the owner's private signal for the burgee on single-masted yachts without bow staff, when the boat is underway.

Owner's Private Signal

This is generally swallow-tailed in shape, but may be rectangular or pennant-shaped. It is flown from the masthead of a single-masted motorboat or sailboat, or from the aftermost mast of motor or sailing vessels with two or more masts. It may be flown by day only, or day and night. A mastless motorboat may fly this signal from the bow staff in place of a club burgee.

Officer Flags

Flags designating yacht club or USPS officers are rectangular in shape, blue (with white design) for senior officers; red for next lower in rank; and white (with blue design) for lower ranks. Other officer flags may be swallow-tailed or triangular in shape.

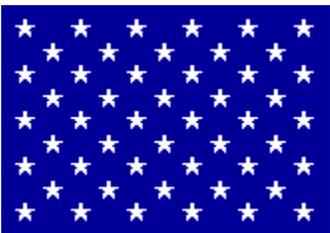
An officer flag is flown in place of the owner's private signal on all rigs of motor and sailing vessels except single-masted sailboats, when it is flown in place of the club burgee at the masthead. On smaller motorboats without a signal mast, a USPS officer flag may be flown from a radio antenna, preferably to starboard, either singly or beneath the USPS ensign.

USCG Auxiliary Officer Flags

The flag of a USCG Auxiliary officer flies day and night when the officer is on board. On a vessel without a mast, it is flown at the bow staff in place of the USCG Auxiliary ensign; on a vessel with a mast, it is flown at the starboard spreader. Past officer burgees are displayed in the same manner.

Only one officers pennant may be flown at a time, and an incumbent officers pennant invariably takes precedence. When the Auxiliary ensign is displayed, it is considered improper to hoist a guest, owner absent, meal, cocktail, or novelty flag.

Union Jack



A rectangular blue flag with 50 stars-the upper quadrant of the National Ensign nearest the hoist, properly referred to as a **canton**. It may be flown **only** at the jack staff on sailing yachts or the jack staff of motor yachts with more than one mast, **only** while not underway on Sundays and national holidays. USPS does not encourage the use of the Union Jack in association with recreational boating.

Size of Flags

Although flags come in a fixed, standardized series of sizes, there are guidelines which will help in selecting the proper size for your boat.

Keeping in mind that flags are more often too small than too large, use the rules given below, and round upward to the nearest **larger** standard size.

The flag at the stern of your boat-U.S. ensign, yacht ensign, or USPS ensign-should be one inch on the fly for each foot of overall length. The hoist will normally be two-thirds of the fly, but some flags such as the USCG Auxiliary ensign have different proportions.

Other flags such as club burgees, officer flags, and private signals for use on sailboats should be approximately 1/2 inch on the fly for each foot of the highest mast above the water. For flying on powerboats, these flags should be roughly 5/8 inch on the fly for each foot of overall length. The shape and proportions of pennants and burgees will be prescribed by the organization to which they relate. A union jack should be the same size as the corresponding portion of the national ensign.

Raising and Lowering Flags

"Colors are made" each morning at 0800; as mentioned, at yacht club and similar organization docks or anchorages, this may be signaled by a morning gun. The national ensign or yacht ensign is hoisted at the stern (or set in place on its staff). This is followed by the USPS ensign at the starboard spreader (if not already flying on a day-and-night basis) provided the skipper is an active member of USPS. Then comes the club burgee or Squadron burgee at the bow, and the private signal at the masthead. (An officer flag, if flown in place of a private signal, would be flown continuously.)

If the boat bears a valid USCG Auxiliary Facility decal, it would be flying the Auxiliary ensign at the masthead day and night. The USCG Auxiliary officer's pennant or burgee may be flown day or night. On smaller craft, the same sequence should be followed, with the flags on their staff being set in the appropriate locations.

At sunset, colors not properly flown on a day-and-night basis should be lowered in reverse sequence, the ensign at the stern always being the last to be secured.

Dressing Ship

On national holidays, at regattas, and on other special occasions, yachts often "dress ship" with International Code signal flags. The ship is dressed at 0800, and remains so dressed until evening colors (while at anchor only, except for a vessel's maiden and final voyages, and participation in a marine parade or other unique situation).

In dressing ship, the yacht ensign is hoisted at the stern staff, and the Union Jack may be displayed at the jack (bow) staff. A rainbow of flags of the International Code is arranged, reaching from the water line forward to the water line aft, by way of the bowsprit end (or stem if there's no bowsprit) and the masthead(s). Flags and pennants are bent on alternately, rather than in any indiscriminate manner. Since there are twice as many letter flags as numeral pennants, it is good practice, as in the Navy, to follow a sequence of two flags, one pennant, two flags, one pennant, throughout. The sequence recommended here provides a harmonious color pattern throughout:

Starting from forward: AB2, UJ1, KE3, GH6, IV5, FL4, DM7, PO Third Repeater, RN First Repeater, ST Zero, CX9, WQ8, ZY Second Repeater.

Honoring Other National Flags

As a matter of courtesy, it is proper to fly the flag of a foreign nation on your boat when you enter and operate on its waters. There are only a limited number of positions from which flags may be displayed, and consequently when a flag of another nation is flown, it usually must displace one of the flags commonly displayed in home waters. It is not hoisted until clearance has been completed and the yellow "Q" flag has been removed, and the vessel has been granted *pratique* by the appropriate authorities.

The following are general guidelines to follow regarding courtesy flags:

- On a mastless powerboat, the courtesy flag of another nation replaces any flag that is normally flown at the bow of the boat.
- When a motorboat has a mast with spreaders, the courtesy flag is flown at the starboard spreader.
- On a two-masted motorboat, the courtesy flag displaces any flag normally flown at the forward starboard spreader.
- On a sailboat, the courtesy flag is flown at the boat's starboard spreader, whether the United States ensign is at the stern staff, or flown from the leech. If there is more than one mast, the courtesy flag is flown from the starboard spreader of the forward mast.

Although these points serve as protocol in most waters, keep in mind that customs observed in various foreign waters differ from one another; in case of doubt, inquire locally or observe other craft from your country.

As noted previously, U.S. vessels while in international or foreign waters must fly the U.S. ensign (50-star flag) at the stern or gaff or leech, rather than the USPS ensign or the yacht ensign. When the starboard spreader is used for the "courtesy ensign" of the foreign country, the USPS ensign or similar flag may be flown from the port spreader; if the vessel has multiple flag halyards on the starboard spreader, the USPS ensign is flown there, inboard from the courtesy ensign.

The U.S. ensign, club burgee, officer flag, and private signal are flown as in home waters. Don't fly a foreign courtesy ensign after you have returned to U.S. waters. Although this may show that you've "been there," it is **not** proper flag etiquette.

Half-Masting Flags

A flag is flown at half-mast (or half-staff) in respect for a deceased person. Although there are no laws governing the half-masting of flags on private vessels, or at private homes and clubs, most citizens follow the flag display customs that are used on U.S. Government buildings and ships.

The only authorities who can direct that the U.S. ensign be flown at half-mast are the President and the governor of a state, territory or possession. The duration varies from a day or so up to 30 days, determined by the deceased person's position. It is not correct for a yacht club commodore, or official of a similar organization, to order the U.S. ensign to be

flown at half-mast to honor a deceased member — only the burgee or organization flag may be half-masted. On Memorial Day, the U.S. flag is flown at half-mast until 1220, the time of the final gun of the traditional 21-gun salute commencing at noon.

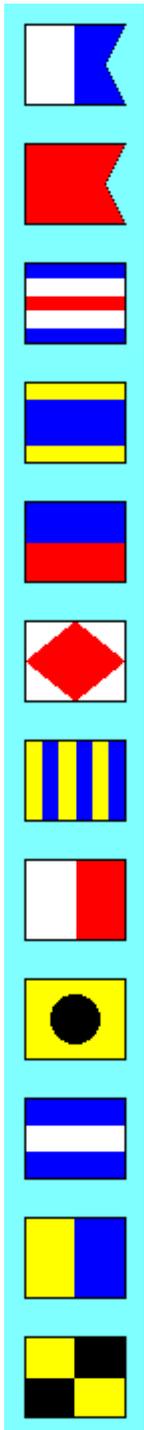
On a simple flagstaff — as at the stern of a vessel or a flagpole ashore — the "half-mast" position is approximately three-fourths the way up to the top. If the flagpole has a yardarm, or yardarm and gaff, the half-mast position is that which is level with the yardarm.

When the U.S. flag is displayed at half-mast on a vessel, other flags remain at their normal position. When it is half-masted ashore, fly only a private signal or club burgee at masthead of a gaff-rigged mast with it.

When the U.S. ensign is to be flown at half-mast, it should be hoisted fully and smartly, and then lowered ceremoniously to the half-mast position. Before lowering, it is again raised to full height and lowered from there.

Some yacht clubs follow the practice of flying the burgee at half-mast for a period of mourning on the death of a club member. A private signal may be flown at half-mast on the death of the owner of that vessel.

International Signal Flags

**A**

When stationary: Diver below, keep clear
When underway: I am undergoing a speed trial

B

I am taking on, discharging, or carrying dangerous (explosives) cargo

C

Yes (affirmative) (see also **N**)

D

Keep clear of me, I am maneuvering with difficulty

E

I am altering my course to starboard (see also **I**)

F

I am disabled, communicate with me

G

I require a pilot

H

I have a pilot on board

I

I am altering my course to port (see also **E**)

J

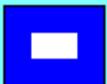
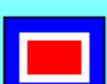
I am on fire, keep clear
I am going to send a message by semaphore

K

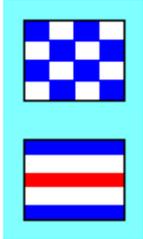
I wish to communicate

L

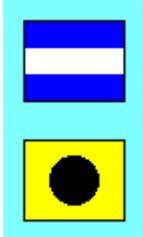
You should stop your vessel instantly

	M	I am stopped I have a doctor on board
	N	No (negative) (see also C)
	O	Man overboard
	P	<i>At moor.</i> - All aboard, vessel is about to depart (the <i>Blue Peter</i>) <i>At sea:</i> Your lights are out or burning badly.
	Q	My vessel is healthy and I request free pratique
	R	The way is off my ship. You may feel you way past me
	S	My engines are going astern
	T	Keep clear of me Do not pass ahead of me
	U	You are standing into danger
	V	I require assistance (not distress)
	W	I require medical assistance
	X	Stop carrying out your intentions and watch for my signals
	Y	I am dragging anchor I am carrying mail
	Z	I require a tug (Used to address or call shore stations)

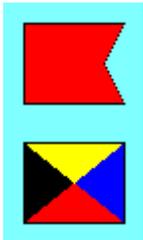
Multiple Flag Messages



N + C I am in distress

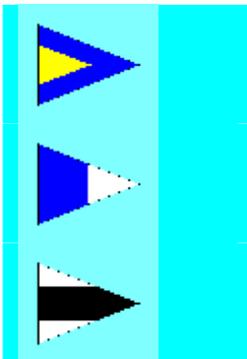


J + I Are you aground?



B + Z Well Done

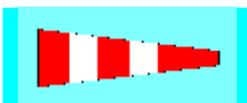
Answering and Substitute Pennants



Substitute 1

Substitute 2

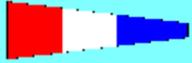
Substitute 3



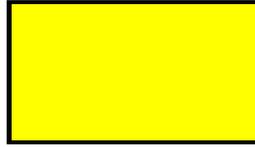
Answering Pennant

Decimal point
Code and answering pennant.

Numeric Pennants

	0
	1
	2
	3
	4
	5
	6
	7
	8
	9

Pratique



"Q" - I Request Pratique

Pratique - def. License or permission to use a port, given to a ship after quarantine or on showing a clean bill of health.

When an American boat crosses the national boundaries of the United States to visit a foreign port, or a foreign-yacht visits an American port, certain customs, immigration, and other regulations must be obeyed. As a result of various provisions and exemptions applying to yachts, not to vessels engaged in trade, the procedure has been so simplified that there is nothing in these legal requirements to deter a recreational craft from enjoying a cruise outside U.S waters. There are severe penalties, however, for failure to observe the regulations that do apply.

On arrival at a foreign port, the owner or captain of a yacht (any size) should report to the authorities. The "Q" flag (plain yellow) should be flown where it can be easily seen — starboard spreader, radio antenna, fishing outrigger, etc. — to indicate that the vessel desires to be boarded by customs and other governmental authorities. When reporting, the crew and guests must remain aboard until permission (*pratique*) has been granted to land.

Once pratique has been granted, the "Q" flag may be lowered and the courtesy flag of that nation may be hoisted.

Summary

Courtesy and National Flags

As a gesture of courtesy, cruisers should fly a foreign nation's flag when they enter and operate in its waters.

1. Rule No. 1 — There are no real rules. Customs observed in various foreign waters differ from each other. We've seen cases where not flying or flying a courtesy flag improperly causes some awkward moments; you may be regarded as impolite, but nothing more. In others, it's local law to fly the flag. Officials can and do impound passports or assess fines until the proper flag (which, of course, can only be purchased locally at great expense) is flying on board. If in doubt, inquire of other cruisers and observe other craft from your country for guidance.
 2. Do not fly a courtesy flag until your vessel is properly cleared by customs and immigration. Until clearance is complete, fly the yellow Q, quarantine, flag.
 3. On a sailboat, the courtesy flag is flown at the starboard spreader. If the sailboat has more than one mast, the courtesy flag is flown from the starboard spreader of the forward mast.
 4. On a mastless powerboat, the courtesy flag replaces any flag that is normally flown at the bow.
 5. If a powerboat has a mast with spreaders, the courtesy flag is flown at the starboard spreader.
 6. On a two-masted powerboat, the courtesy flag displaces any flag normally flown at the forward spreader.
 7. Courtesy flags are usually *Civil Ensigns* — not the national flag of the country. Not every country has a civil ensign. However, most former British colonies do; it is usually the red variant of the flag. It's considered a horrible breach of etiquette to fly the blue national flag. So, if the flag that we catalog ([Courtesy Flags](#)) doesn't look exactly like the national flag that you remember, it's probably a civil ensign.
 8. Don't fly a foreign courtesy flag after you return to U.S. waters. It may show that you've been there, but it's not proper etiquette.
 9. Generally, the vessel's national flag is flown from the stern (or leach) when a courtesy flag displaces it.
 10. It's better form for U.S. vessels to fly the U.S. flag (the "stars and stripes" with a full complement of 50 stars) at the stern or gaff or leach, rather than a Yacht Ensign. If you want to fly a Yacht or USPS Ensign, do so from the port spreader on a sailboat. If there are multiple flag halyards available on the starboard spreader, the Yacht or USPS Ensign is flown there, inboard from the courtesy ensign.
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11. Any citizen of any state may fly the flag of that state unless doing so is specifically prohibited. It should be flown at the main masthead in place of any private, yacht club, or officer's flag. On a mastless boat, a state flag flies from either the bow or radio antenna.
12. No flag — state, heritage, Confederate, pirate, gag, or otherwise — except for the vessel's national flag, should EVER fly from the stern of your vessel. This is considered a place of honor, for the vessel's national flag and no other.

Sizing Flags

Chapman's recommends the following:

1. The flag at the stern of your boat — U.S. Ensign, Yacht Ensign, USPS Ensign, or vessel's national flag — should be one inch on the fly for every foot of overall vessel length (e.g. 48" flag for a 48' foot vessel).
2. Other flags — club burgees, private signals, or courtesy flags — should be ½" for every foot of overall vessel length.

Christine Davis differs with a somewhat more practical approach. She suggests that you let your eye be your guide. Generally, yachts up to 50' in length look properly "dressed" with a 16" x 24" ensign and 12" x 18" courtesy flags. Size up one step for every 25-or-so additional feet in length. If you prefer the look of larger flags, go ahead — just make sure that there is a clear 360-degree fly from your halyards. Otherwise, your flags will soon be in tatters.

Other Flags

There are a number of flags that once were used on large yachts with professional crews (such as owner absent, cocktail, meal, etc.). Others are still common:

1. Diving Flags: There are two flags flown by diving operations: a red flag with a single diagonal stripe of white and International Code Flag "A". It is generally no proper to fly dive flags on shore.
 2. Quarantine Flag: International Code Flag "Q" is flown when entering a foreign port (except Canada and a few others) or when returning to a U.S. port from a foreign cruise. It signals to customs and immigration officials that you request clearance. Take it down and replace it with a courtesy flag after formalities are complete.
 3. Union Jack: A rectangular blue flag with 50 stars, the Union Jack may be flown as follows:
 - a. Flying only at the jack staff — the bow staff on modern craft
 - b. Flying only during the day
 - c. Flying only when moored
 - d. Flying only on Sundays, national holidays, or when dressing ship
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Dressing Ship

On national holidays, at regattas, and on other special occasions, yachts often “dress ship,” displaying a decorative collection of International Code signal flags. The following conventions are recommended:

1. Dress ship at 0800 and keep dress until nightfall.
 2. Keep the dressed ship moored, except for its maiden or final voyages or for participation in parades.
 3. Hoist the Ensign at the stern. Display the Union Jack (if desired) at the bow.
 4. Hoist a rainbow of International Code Flags from the waterline forward to the waterline aft from stem (or bowsprit) to the masthead(s).
 5. Bend on flags and pennants alternately. Since there are twice as many letter as numeral pennants, it is regarded as good practice to follow the following sequence:
 - a. Two flags, one pennant, two flags, one pennant, and so on
 - b. A popular example with an appealing color pattern is (from forward): AB2, UJ1, KE3, GH6, IV5, FL4, DM7, PO Third Repeater, RN First Repeater, ST Zero, CX9, WQ8, ZY Second Repeater.
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