

Accentuate the Positive (Eliminate the Negative)

By Marion Allen

A central theme of President Bush's inaugural address was the concern with decreasing levels of civility in our society. Whatever your political persuasion, I think you will agree that we see this in our everyday lives and can appreciate the significance for our country's well being. I regret to say that this lack of common courtesy and sensitivity to the feelings of others is a problem in the orchid world as well. It casts a negative shadow on an otherwise delightful activity — orchid judging.

It could be said that the hectic pace of modern life and the stresses of earning a living are causing the breakdown of behavior in the working world, but how then does one account for rudeness and lack of consideration in a volunteer activity like orchid judging. There should be no room for discourtesy when each one of us is there, in theory, because we want to be. No one is forcing us to participate. We made our commitment to serve the orchid community of our own free will because of the pleasure we take in sharing our knowledge and evaluating beautiful flowers. How is it then that, at a recent large show, I served on a team where the atmosphere was strained because of the rude behavior of one member? No one stepped in to correct the situation. We allowed a famous name and reputation to excuse a poor attitude and discourtesy. We wasted the opportunity for education and missed out on the satisfaction of a job well done.

Whether we are judging at our center or at a large show, our behavior reflects on the AOS and the entire judging system. At our center's monthly judging session, there may be people there who are new to orchids — novice growers who are eager to soak up anything they can to help them learn about their new hobby. These people are especially vulnerable to hearing unflattering remarks about the plants brought in for judging. They may not own the plant you just described as having lousy form and muddy color, but they will certainly be discouraged from bringing plants in for consideration when they do bloom theirs successfully. They are not likely to risk hearing those types of comments about one of their own plants. It is vital that when we reject flowers during the screening process, as we must do, we do so with praise as well as criticism. It's not hard to say "What a charming flower" or, "This is a well-grown plant" while rejecting it for scoring. A few hints about staking or preparing a plant for judging are constructive, as is the comment that the flower may well improve greatly with another year's growth. One of the experts in what I call "Judging Positively" was the late Don Herman. I had the privilege of serving on a team with Herman in my early student days and will never forget how gently he handled the screening process. I have tried to emulate him in this regard but freely admit to falling short on occasion.

At large shows, where judging conditions are far from ideal, it can be harder to remain positive about the process. We may feel that we are among our peers and can afford to relax our standards. This could not be further from the truth. Among those hard-working people hurrying to deliver flowers for our consideration are the next generation of student judges. If anything, we should be more concerned with projecting a friendly but professional image. Without a steady stream of new students, our numbers may dwindle to the point where we are unable to fulfill our obligations to local societies and shows.

The worst negative attitudes I've encountered have been at Member Meetings' shows. It is easy to slip into the negative mind-set of "Who on earth marked this one for us?" and "Why was this pulled?" Perhaps someone very knowledgeable about a certain genus recognized a superior species, or someone who bloomed several of a particular hybrid and knows that this one is unusually good, marked these plants for further examination. Don't we trust our fellow judges' opinions? Are we so smug that we can afford to reject these plants out of hand? Each plant brought to our judging tables should receive a thorough evaluation. Most teams have at least one student or probationary judge who needs the experience of working under adverse conditions to find as much information as possible from limited resources. We cannot afford to waste these educational opportunities. These meetings are often the only chance for our less-experienced judges to hear the opinions of the old-timers. Those who have served for years need to nurture students and pass on their knowledge whenever they can. It may be difficult not to be blasé, but it is important to the future of orchid judging that they not be. We should all try to make judging a positive experience for everyone involved.

There are times in everyone's lives when things are not going well and our attitudes suffer for it. We made the commitment to be orchid judges for many reasons, among them our love for orchids, desire to educate others about our standards of beauty, and belief that we perform an important service for the orchid community. If your enthusiasm has waned and you are no longer able to serve with dignity and respect for your fellow judges, perhaps a sabbatical is in order. The academic world recognizes the need for time to recharge batteries; perhaps it is time for us to do so too. The cure for negativity is pretty easy — spend a few days in the greenhouse with your plants. This will remind you of why you became an orchid judge, and is guaranteed to bring the joy back into your life.

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