

Judging Lycastes

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Published in December 1998 Awards Quarterly

A lycaste can be an impressive entry in a judging event. The triangular conformation – three large sepals with petals of lesser size typically reaching to shelter the forward-arching lip and column – and flowering habit – one flower on each of perhaps dozens of inflorescences – can present a classy display. Astonishing numbers of flowers can appear under a graceful fountain of broad, linear-ribbed leaves atop plants of evergreen ancestry, or over a cluster of bare, often thorn-tipped, deciduous pseudobulbs.

Lycastes vary from the norms of other popular alliances that have judging point scales customized to their unique features. The General Point Scale is usually used by default, but can be customized. *Lycaste* petals, while relatively minor, are of more consequence than those of *Masdevallia*, the scale for which counts no petal points. The nearly equal sepals do not conform to the unifloral *Paphiopedilum* pattern of dominant dorsal and lesser synsepal. The scale designed for unifloral paphiopedilums, occasionally suggested for lycastes, also fails to account for typical *Lycaste* characteristics. It offers no points for habit and arrangement of inflorescences and floriferousness (having reapportioned those points into Form and Color for dorsal sepal use). These are not pouchless paphiopedilums, which highlights a perennial inequity: high awards to lycastes exhibited with low flower counts.

A single lycaste flower can possess notable grace. However, when judging, flower quantity should be emphasized because lycastes are, and ought to be judged as, polyfloral orchids, not unifloral as with standard paphiopedilums. Just about all of the species bear several flowers per front lead when grown well, including those from which today's hybrids are frequently derived. All too often, a young plant or small division with one flower or two will impress the judges and receive a merit award. A better recognition of a plant's quality performance would be to award mature plants with flower counts appropriate to their background. More numerous, fractionally smaller flowers of high-quality form and color are worth significantly more than one or two fractionally larger. On a proposed lycaste point scale (see box at right), Petals and Lip give up five points between them to Sepals within both Form and Color; within Other Characteristics, Size gives up five to Floriferousness. These shifts reflect the relative importance of the augmented characteristics over the downsized ones.

Various attributes of the species, and of hybrids displaying influences of the major parental species, would be background specific. The genus *Lycaste* is divided into three main sections, with the members of each section sharing some cohesive features, though one section is subdivided further. The sections are: Macrophyllae (*Lyc. skinneri*, *Lyc. macrophylla*); Fimbriatae (*Lyc. ciliate*, *Lyc. locusta*); and Deciduosae, with subsections Xanthanthae (*Lyc. cruenta*, *Lyc. deppei*, *Lyc. lasioglossa*) and Paradeciduosae (*Lyc. brevispatha*, *Lyc. candida*). A highly useful and accessible reference is *Lycaste Species – The Essential Guide* by Dr. Henry F. Oakeley.

In lycastes of quality, form tends to be more full and rounded. Symmetry of the sepals is approximately that of an equilateral triangle, the carriage of the lateral sepals affected by heritage – from the extremes of an obtuse isosceles triangle, or perhaps an inverted “T,” in some Deciduosae subsection Xanthanthae species to rather “bow-legged” in most Fimbriatae. Many of the Macrophyllae and Deciduosae subsection Paradediduosae are capable of the perfect radial symmetry and fullness circumscribed by the Mercedes Benz logo. Hybrids between sections should tend toward the ideal form of the predominant species, with variances exhibiting high degrees of grace and balance over awkward angularity or asymmetry. Angulocastes, intergeneric hybrids with *Anguloa* (tulip orchids), exhibit severe cupping in early generations. Further breeding back to the lycastes can flatten the flowers more and reduces the jumbo scale of the plants, yet retains some of the distinct, wide-load aspect of the lateral sepals.

Flatness is preferable, so that more of the sepals present themselves in one plane, but demanding ironed-flat flowers could be over-zealous. Fimbriatae dorsal sepals usually arch forward over the column. Cupping is inviting if very slight, but gives a false impression of fullness if excessive. An even ruffling of margins can be charming. Sepal tips reflexing out of view, and excessive or random furling of margins detract seriously from conformation. These faults can appear as the flowers age, so timing of exhibition can be problematic. Basically, scoring the form of individual flower parts should account for the merits expected of the type and meet the expectations or standards of quality desired in any fine orchid. Such flaws as notched apices or margins, raised ribs or crowding of the petals and lip should call a plant’s quality into question, just as reflexing and furling does. Petals of a few species open almost in the plane of the sepals (*Lyc. cochleata*, *Lyc. brevispatha*, *Lyc. locusta*). Some exhibitors defeat the natural grace of forward-reaching petals by popping them back to flatten them.

Color should be distinctive, whether clear or attractively blended. Muddiness and indistinct color is common in many lines, especially when *Lyc. skinneri* is involved. Frequently, a greenish or brownish cast is present to spoil the lovely pinks, rose and whites that are trademarks of this often-bred species. Lacking the dirtlike appearance does not necessarily mean awardable color, however. Pink, rose or white can and should be vibrant and deep. Yellows and greens should be rich, not simply clear, as these color commonly are. We look for the exceptional in flowers, not just the ordinary. The deep reds and browns that arise from blending the brown-flowered species with pink *Lyc. skinneri*, and adding shots of yellow or green for brightness, vary from dull to quite lustrous and sinfully rich.

Color patterns might show up because lycastes are not all uniform. Color differences between flower parts should be harmonious or pleasingly eye-catching. A distinct lip color can be a terrific focal point.

Other characteristics (size excepted, as stated above) should significantly play into our judgment.

Substance is characteristically good in this genus, so truly heavy substance should be sought after. Texture, in contrast, can be weaker generally, with the exception being the waxy-glossy Fimbriatae. Great: Satiny, crystalline, waxy, pearly, lustrous, glossy, glowing, polished. Bad: Mealy, grainy, dull, webby, doughy, punky, rough. Habit and arrangement can take a hit when flower count is low for the breeding. As polyflorals, plants should carry flowers well-spaced so each is shown to advantage, yet be part of the club. A couple or three pointedly ignoring each other across the pot makes a sorry show of camaraderie. Perfectly spaced, the display should allow an ant to circumnavigate the floral archipelago, with a gentle stretch to step sepal-to-sepal. Stems: self-supporting; erect if few; some to near horizontal if among many; straight, not wriggling and diving like a spilled basket of escaping cobras.

Floriferousness is one of the keys to the unique charms and impact of this genus. As stressed before, these are nearly all polyfloral, but do not count on award records to confirm this. So many awards have been given to plants bearing one, two or three flowers, you might think them indicative of the genus' potential. Most could be grown to carry six, 10 or even 20 per front lead. And these aren't even in a specimen-class yet. A *Lyc. skinneri* might have 15 on one lead; *Lyc. macrophylla* 75; and their primary hybrid *Lyc. Balliae* has had as many as 58 on one lead in a 5-inch pot. Multilead plants naturally make for tremendous displays. Take a look at photographs of Mrs. Gloria Cotton's specimens exhibited in English shows or a few of the achievements on this continent. Yes, polyploidy, suspected in *Lyc. Wyldcourt* 'Sir William Cooke', FCC/RHS-AOS, and perhaps its progeny, may reduce floriferousness while boosting form and color. However, let's recall that steps backward are steps to be recovered in progress forward. We can be sure that we'll see, and be asked to judge, more of these wonderful, once uncommonly grown and generally unfamiliar orchids. While they may not become as ubiquitous and easy to know as some longtime entrees, neither will they ever be another flavor-of-the-month, easily forgotten when tastes change. Knowing their nuances will make us better judges and aficionados of lycastes.

Proposed Lycaste Point Scale

When tailoring a point scale for lycastes, consider the following as reflective of the expected attributes.

Flower Form

General Form	15
Sepals	10
Petals	3
Labellum	2
Total	30

Color of Flower

General Color	15
Sepals	10
Petals	3
Labellum	2
Total	30

Other Characteristics	
Size of Flower	5
Substance and Texture	10
Habitat and Arrangement	10
Floriferousness	15
Total	40
TOTAL	100

Paul G. Bechtel was chair of the AOS Judging Committee and owner of Dragonstone Orchids.