

## Judging By The Book: The Pursuit of Mediocrity?

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This essay was written in response to a thesis advanced in an article that appeared in *Awards Quarterly* Volume 21, Number 1, Spring 1990. This introduced the view that there should be no acceptance of the concept of a fatal flaw in the judging of orchids and that further, unless the flowers showed some severe deformity such as color break or perhaps were missing a floral component, they should be scored, using the score sheet designed for that purpose. This concept, were it to be widely accepted, would mean the end of meaningful judging for it would reduce the process, in my opinion, to the level of absurdity.

The authors state that “failure to score a plant for a scorable fault, flaw or deficiency prevents our system from working and should be avoided.” On the contrary scoring every plant by the authors’ criteria would distort the judging process and would eliminate any possibility that it would fulfill the purposes for which it was initiated. Implicit in this view of judging is the notion that the judging is designed to recognize all good flowers. The system was not created nor designed to recognize good flowers, excellent flowers or even beautiful flowers. Its purpose, as still delineated in the *Handbook on Judging and Exhibition* was “to grant recognition to new orchid hybrids.” Mrs. Helen Adams, the author of the point score system, did not adhere to the view that has been expressed in the article in question. Her view (and I was present on occasions when she judged and so speak with some knowledge) was that the judging sheets were to be employed after the plant had been deemed worthy of consideration by the judges. Admittedly, judging at that time had reached neither the extent nor the formality that exists today. However, the intent was clear. (Incidentally, our system of mandating judging if a single judge so proposes is not conducive to good judging and is a further step in the wrong direction. I will explain why further on in this paper.)

The authors note that every judge has served on a team where only one member wanted a plant scored but, after scoring, the plant “surprised” the judges by ending up with an award. The only thing that is surprising in that situation is that any judge could be surprised at the outcome! It is almost an inevitability. By and large, plants brought to the judging table are going to be pretty good. The job of the judges is to select those that represent “new and superior forms.” A good judge recognizes a new and superior form and then attempts to rate it by the point system. The point score, designed for the rating of *superior* clones, is by its very structure, unable to make that assessment. It can only assess those aspects of the flower that are strong or weak. “Honest” scoring will almost invariably give a score of 75 points or more (leading often to the unfortunate practice which all of us have seen, of one or two members of the team deliberately giving a ridiculously low score to a flower with the hope of preventing an award.)

The authors’ examples of “fatal flaws” display a misunderstanding of what is meant by the term. Numbers of flowers, size, arrangement of the inflorescence, etc., are not “fatal flaws.” They may, however, be legitimate reasons for leaving the score sheets in their box! A white *Cattleya* with three crowded flowers on an inflorescence, no matter

how excellent the flowers might be, should not be scored. On the other hand, an apple green *Cattleya* with the same characteristics might be worth scoring. Yet, scored on the *Cattleya* scale, both would probably receive an award (10 points only for floriferousness and stem). As a matter of fact, they would probably receive the same number of points! The score sheet can be used effectively only after the decision has been made that this is an award quality flower. That, by the way, is implicit in the provision that “experienced” judges are permitted to ascribe a point score without justifying the various categories in writing.

There *is* a category “fatal flaw” despite the authors’ disclaimer. A fatal flaw is a characteristic that precludes a flower from being awarded, no matter how excellent it may be in most, or nearly all, respects. Think, for instance, of a *Paphiopedilum* which may come to the judging table. This flower is large, of fine texture and substance. Its colors are clear and pleasing, and its shape approaches the ideal. However, the stem on this four and one-half inch flower is two and one-half inches long, and the flower barely gets above the foliage. What will happen if the plant is scored? The stem is worth only five points! This plant will be awarded, likely an AM, possibly an FCC! And yet it has a grievous (fatal) flaw that, far from representing an “improved” form, is a significant step backward. That is what is meant by the term “fatal flaw,” a term which is misapplied in the article in question to various other situations which lead judges to feel that a plant should not be judged. Most of these can be lumped under the heading of mediocrity. To sum it up, most reasonably good orchid flowers if scored on the sheet will receive at least an HCC if the judge uses the scoring system fairly. The task of a good judge is to recognize a superior form and then rate it by a relative score. The real judging takes place before the scoring!

This is why I believe that the decision to mandate point scoring if a single judge so wishes is not in the best interest of the judging system and inevitably leads to the awarding of some pedestrian flowers. Obviously, if only three judges are present, the rule is a sensible one. But where more are available, the necessary number to require nomination for judging should be proportionately increased. If a flower is worth scoring (worth an award) it should be apparent to more than one member of the assemblage! Indeed, it has been my observation that experienced judges are rarely alone in their nomination of a flower, and the “loners” are generally among the more recently certified and thus, less experienced group.

The decision to score a plant should, in my opinion, be made by consensus, or at least by one-third of the judges present. This would result in fewer awards but the awards would carry considerably more significance. And awards should be significant!