

Aspects of Evaluation: Attitude
By Bob Burkey

The *AOS Handbook on Judging and Exhibition* (11th Edition) provides specific guidelines for our system of judging. All judges in our system are required to own this manual and to have thorough knowledge of its contents. Furthermore, training programs at individual centers are expected to provide continuous review of the manual to all judges, regardless of status or tenure.

However, proficiency in knowing the rules of judging will not guarantee proficiency as an orchid judge. For some of us, the process of evaluation is natural and easy; for most of us, however, our judgment is honed by years of training, hard work and close observation. All of us want to see ourselves as fair evaluators of orchid flowers and have cared enough to invest considerable time and energy to become qualified.

Training coordinators should encourage student judges to learn well and strive for excellence. We should develop each student's ability and knowledge of the judging rules. We should evaluate their scores and discuss individual aspects of the judging form, pointing out where we think they have been fair or unfair in their evaluation. It is the job of the training coordinator, therefore, to transform a student judge into a paradigm of an accredited judge.

What's wrong with this picture? Those of us who are or have been training coordinators will immediately see the problem. Namely, like it or not, the process of evaluation is an intensely personal activity, drawing heavily upon our own experience, aesthetic predispositions and attitudes, all of which shade our scores. Training coordinators cannot impart decades of orchid experience in three years, nor are they expected to have PhDs qualifying them to teach the philosophy of aesthetics. Certainly, few among us are professionally trained to clinically direct a student's attitude.

The role of a training coordinator is much like that of a parent. The training coordinator, like a good parent, should teach a student how he or she can acquire the information and refine the skills necessary to meet a specific goal: In this case, to become a qualified orchid judge. The training coordinator should encourage all judges to obtain as much exposure to orchids as possible by visiting orchid nurseries, reading orchid literature, attending shows and exhibitions and generally keeping current with changing trends in hybridizing in the major genera, as these will be the plants they are most likely to encounter in the judging room. Aesthetic judgment should also be continually discussed. The meaning of texture, for example, has many applications that can affect the overall evaluation of color and the points thereto assigned. Finally, there is that other elephant lurking in the room: Attitude. Using the parent analogy once again, do I need to say more?

Most students are eager to please and they are also fearful. They try to withhold bombastic opinions until later, in the safety of their inner circle while perhaps sipping coffee (or something stronger) at the local restaurant. We can relate: We've all expressed outrage at one time or another about results of a certain judging. Why did they or didn't they do that? What were they thinking? Don't they know anything?

So, ultimately, the challenge for the training coordinator is to anticipate a student's inevitable outrage and confront that ugly attitude before it happens. Sure, we make mistakes. Sure, sometimes awardable or good flowers get the short shaft. Sure, some of us get up on the wrong side of the bed in the morning. But life goes on and mistakes can be minimized by being vigilant, aware of parentage and/or award standards and fair.

Being fair sounds so simple, then the accredited judges start their postmortem analysis of why such-and-such was awarded and such-and-such wasn't. And, often times, the training coordinator is cringing in the corner, wishing ear plugs could be standard issue to student judges. They are told one thing, and they hear and see another.

For example, there seems to be a rule in orchid judging called the rule of the excluded middle. Some of us call it the fatal flaw. Why didn't that get awarded? Too small. How many points are awarded for size? Ten.

(Or is it 50? Is it possible to assign no points for size? Isn't an average flower, by definition, worth five points?) Or why did that spray of cymbidiums get screened? Notice the ding in the third flower in a spray of 15? Or why didn't the *Doritaenopsis* get awarded? Poor arrangement. That's it. It is either/or, meaning a flower must go all the way or stay paralyzed in the starting gate. What is a student to think? That evaluation hinges upon minute elements of imperfection upon which a flower can at times be elevated or not, according to seeming whims of judgment?

We also seem to have a law of diminishing returns associated with a principle holding that the longer we are judges, the less we have to say to justify our evaluations. After analyzing the merits of a flower under consideration, how often has one heard the ultimate put-down: "It just didn't grab me." This is usually after the training coordinator has given his lecture to the students on how judging is not a popularity contest. Do we need to like a flower in order to award it? If I do not like the color red, does that mean I will never award a red flower? Shouldn't personal biases or aesthetic preferences be excluded as criteria for objective evaluations?

Then we have personality conflicts. Judge A is in a horrible mood. Maybe judge B didn't say hello to him, or maybe he just discovered his income tax is to be audited. Maybe there are more serious differences between judges that can affect how they score. The concept of fairness is necessarily linked to an individual's sense of morality. Sometimes getting even is more in line with a person's sense of justice, and the exhibitor is the target of evaluation instead of the flower before them.

The bottom line is: Who we are and what attitudes we harbor inevitably factor into how we judge, or at least how we apply the rules in accordance with individual evaluation. As we judge, so are we being judged. Those students waiting in the wings are scrutinizing our every move, our every comment and our seemingly hidden personal biases. Most importantly, we are being judged as moral human beings who engage in a process where fairness should be fundamental.

Before judging our next plant, we should all step back and take a deep breath. As the plant is placed before us we should pause, take a good long look, clear the mind and ask ourselves: "Can I be truly objective in evaluating this plant?" If for any reason the answer to that question is negative, we have the responsibility to the exhibitor, to the plant, and to our system of judging to excuse ourselves.

We should judge but not be judgmental, criticize constructively without meanness of spirit, and speak to the strengths of a flower before commenting upon its weaknesses. Furthermore, judging orchids should be seen as a privilege and not simply a service we are providing for the benefit of others. We should never have an attitude we are doing an exhibitor a favor by judging his or her plant. We are servants to the orchid community as a whole, and our goal should be to help that community by filling an advisory position and not an authoritative one. We are offering opinions, not edicts writ in stone.

Indeed, we should probably thank exhibitors for the opportunity to evaluate their orchids. Without exhibitors, judges would be out of work. We must remember above all else, each exhibitor values his or her orchid as if it were family. In submitting a plant for judging, the exhibitor not only puts his or her plant on the line but also his or her own judgment. Given this, an orchid judge should never demean what another values. Yet how often have we heard quick retorts of "what a load of rubbish" or "what a rotten little runt!" Any such comment, even if spoken inside the judging room, can be retold to the exhibitor. Never should an orchid judge be responsible for replacing enthusiasm with bitterness.

So how does a training coordinator teach new students to have the right attitude? It is impossible without the help of everyone in the AOS judging system. We must set proper examples to those we serve and to those we are training to be our peers. We must do our jobs with respect for others and be mindful of the public position we hold as AOS judges. Above all else, let us develop a humble attitude and give thanks for being allowed to participate in a system where assessment and appreciation of beauty is our goal. Let's keep the ugliness out of the judging room.

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