

Regionalism and Unwritten Rules of Judging

By Bob Burkey

The American Orchid Society has grown steadily from its inception in 1921. Begun by east coast aristocrats, today's AOS membership includes people from all walks of life from every geographical area of the United States and beyond. Our judging system has a parallel history of evolution. It was originally modeled after the Royal Horticultural Society's Orchid Committee, where invited individuals voted based on personal preference. As the AOS grew in membership and geographical representation, it became clear that a judging system should be established to standardize regional societies. It was simply not practical to expect each member within the far reaches of the various societies to submit plants for judging to a central committee residing thousands of miles away. Rather, the scope of judging needed to expand to meet the growing needs for exhibition and evaluation within each individual region, thereby encouraging and recognizing the pursuit of excellence in orchids. Thus, our judging system evolved to the present-day community of judges following standardized rules. In 1949, the first edition of *The Handbook on Judging and Exhibition* was created to encode these rules and provide guidelines for formal evaluation based on established criteria.

Today we have 30 judging centers, covering every region of the United States. In 1996, each center was granted autonomy from regional control to allow more flexibility in providing judging service to the AOS membership. This reorganization enables a restructuring of the regional concept into "a community of judging centers without sharply defined boundaries."

The rising number of plants exhibited at judging centers and orchid shows naturally translates to rising numbers of awards given yearly through the system. The expanded scope of judging service now includes venues such as Colombia, Puerto Rico, Japan and Taiwan. With each volume, the *Awards Quarterly* grows, cataloging 1,943 awards in 2002. It is paramount to the integrity of the system that each judge review all awards given within the system. The first criterion or standard by which merit judging recognizes superiority and improvement is stated in the *Handbook* as: "In scoring for quality, judges should evaluate the qualities to be scored in terms of (1) the hypothetical standard of perfection, at the time . . ." Each judge, therefore, must be responsible for continually upgrading his knowledge concerning the current merit awards as recognized not only at his center, but in every center within the AOS system. We maintain our "hypothetical standards of perfection, at the time," by comparing recently awarded plants with those currently under consideration. An uninformed judge is guilty of conceptual anachronism. His outmoded standards sabotage the consistency required for the judging process.

Keeping abreast of the many awarded plants from all centers in the AOS system is daunting. Most centers have review sessions where awards slides are shown and discussed. These sessions allow judges to refine and update their concepts of perfection by seeing the full scope of the newest improvements of awarded plants. However, the ambiguity of the meaning of "hypothetical standards of perfection" becomes apparent when no tangible cross-references are available by which these "improvements" can be quantified. We have measurements and broad-stroke descriptions, but no definitive criteria beyond the individual judging team's assessment with that particular judging center at a specific time.

Often at the Hawaii Judging Center's review sessions, the question inevitably arises, "Why was that flower awarded?" quickly followed by, "Where was it awarded?" We ask these questions because we recognize discrepancies within our putative standards for evaluation. Perhaps the rapid growth of the judging system, coupled with the call for increased service, has caused systemic problems with the consistency of AOS awards. Our *Handbook* presents guidelines for merit evaluations based on very broad concepts that are interpreted differently from judge to judge, from center to center. One judge's conception of perfection in a standard white phalaenopsis, for example, may differ from another judge's idea about that flower's merit within its comparable type, breeding or other characteristics. The resulting evaluation will be skewed, only to be mitigated by discussion clarifying the basis for consensus. This discussion becomes the cross-reference addressing the question, "Why was that flower awarded?" Unfortunately, such discussion does not always lead to an explanation. We are usually left with the assumption that the other center's standards must be different from ours.

No one expects AOS judges to be un-mutated clones or soldier-like machines fine-tuned to judging perfection after years of training. Exercising judgment is a specialized skill incorporating detailed knowledge with aesthetic evaluation. The process is part science, part art, and part unmitigated gall. Our judgment at the core is a critical evaluation where our ultimate score is determined not by what is right with a flower, but rather by what is wrong. The two words, “criterion” and “critic” have the same Greek root, *krinein*, “to judge, discern.” A criterion is by definition “a standard of judging; a rule or test by which anything is tried in forming a correct judgment respecting it.” And a critic is defined as “one who expresses a reasoned opinion on any matter involving a judgment of its value, truth, or righteousness or an appreciation of its beauty or technique.” We are, as AOS judges, critics who utilize broad criteria as fodder for (sometimes bombastic) blasts of discernment.

If we recognize that our judging system is based on broad guidelines that can be interpreted differently, it follows that inconsistency will be a nagging problem. We must also recognize that regional rules compound this problem. The second question most frequently asked in award-slide review sessions is, “Where was it awarded?” When the locality is given, it is usually followed by the comment, “Oh that explains it.” Strong regional opinions seem to be based on unwritten rules that discriminate about what can or cannot count as criteria for a fatal flaw. One region may assume that a *Masdevallia* with less than two flowers per plant will be rejected for award consideration, where another region may assume that a *Phalaenopsis* spike with less than eight, nine or 10 flowers will not be considered for an award, while still another region may assume that no *Odontoglossum* with any semblance of a pinched lip will be judged, while another region may assume that no *Cymbidium* with different lip-blotch patterning flower to flower on a spike will be scored, and so on. The nebulous concept of what ultimately constitutes a fatal flaw lends carte blanche rationale to individual and regional unwritten rules for discernment (discrimination). One region may respond to charges of “That would never receive an award at our center,” with the retort, “Your criticism would only be a five-point deduction at our center.” Hence the final product, inconsistency.

The preceding comments are not meant as an indictment of the AOS judging system. Rather, the purpose of these comments is to recognize a problem with our general approach to judging. We must overcome a major systemic problem with inconsistency of awards by upgrading the technique by which we apply our collective hypothetical concept of perfection. This can be accomplished through a proposed network of computers that could link upgraded data files to include the most recently awarded flowers along with cross-referenced statistics to give a better view to current dimensions for type and breeding lines. In addition to an awards registrar, perhaps we need an awards systems analyst to not only compile award data, but also to organize and distribute statistical reports to better identify regional aberrations. Secondly, our proposed National Training Program could include hyper-specific guidelines concerning problem areas or current breeding trends. A trans-regional panel of judges could formulate these guidelines through interaction in e-mail. And as a final recommendation, a national newsletter could be initiated that deals specifically with interregional differences as well as a continuing dialogue concerning the myriad of unwritten rules that haunt the regionalization of our system.

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