

Aces of Spades: In Praise of Isthmus-lip Cattleyas

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It's been said that beauty is in the eye of beholder. That being the case, can anyone assert that his or her appreciation of beauty is better than that of somebody else? Whether we like it or not, there will always be someone who will disagree with our assessment of beauty. But is there such a thing as quantifiable beauty? Assuming for the sake of argument that there is, how do we go about quantifying beauty? How do we determine the difference between a beautiful flower and a very beautiful flower? Worse yet, how do we go about measuring the difference between just plain *beautiful* and *very beautiful*?

I have no intention of starting a philosophical debate on the subject of beauty; I merely want to point out the astounding achievement in general consensus that the *Handbook on Judging and Exhibition* represents. Taking into consideration the enormous complexity of the subject of beauty appreciation, the fact that a set of guidelines has been agreed upon and established, including an orderly and logical way of quantifying what we as orchid judges perceive as beauty, is nothing short of miraculous. Unfortunately, everything in life must change with the passage of time or risk becoming an obsolete relic of the past. As monumental an accomplishment as it is, the handbook is not perfect. As its name implies, it is meant to be a set of guidelines that must be constantly evolving. It's not meant to be a constitution of absolute, irrevocable rules.

Historically, the classical ideal of desirability embodied in *Cattleya labiata* has been the standard for the entire *Cattleya* alliance. Regarding the shape of the lip, the handbook states: "The lip should be proportionate to the petals with a rounded, flattened, symmetrical and crisped or frilled trumpet; it should be closed toward the base and more or less rolled around the column."

This is unquestionably an accurate description of the ideal shape for a labiate *Cattleya* lip. However, the fact remains that the enormous diversity found in the *Cattleya* alliance, from species through primary hybrids to complex intergeneric hybrids, makes a uniform standard of desirability applicable to all impossible to implement. The handbook does recognize this dilemma in other genera such as *Paphiopedilum*, and not by accident. This is due to the diligent efforts of many judges who recognized the need for a revised set of standards that would reflect current realities. The resulting changes in judging criteria for *Paphiopedilum* and other genera were incorporated into the handbook the last time it was revised.

Now that the handbook is being revised once again we are offered a unique opportunity to bring the judging criteria for the *Cattleya* alliance up to date. In order to achieve this, we must first revise our ideals of desirability, so that our judgment reflects a thorough understanding of the enormous variety and complexity of the *Cattleya* alliance. By this I'm not suggesting that we relax our standards. On the contrary, we should raise them by fine tuning our judging criteria to suit the many categories involved in this vast group. We must recognize that to impose a uniform standard of desirability to the entire *Cattleya*

alliance is not only unrealistic, it is also a nearsighted approach that inevitably leads to prejudice.

We must approach cattleyas as the vast, diverse and complex group that it is. In order to expand our judging perspectives, I am proposing a set of guidelines aimed specifically at judging bifoliate cattleyas with the hope that further discussion on this group, as well as others in the alliance, will result in a revised set of criteria to be incorporated into the handbook. This proposal follows this essay, and is wide open to debate.

I would like to illustrate the inadequacy of applying a uniform standard of judging to the *Cattleya* alliance by discussing the following examples, starting with *Brassolaeliocattleya* Malworth 'Orchidglade'. This flower received an FCC of 93 points in February 1969. To this day there are judges who believe this flower never should have received such an award. No doubt this sentiment is fueled by the unspoken prejudice against isthmus lips inherent in our standards of desirability as they are currently written. Frankly, I don't see how a full brasso lip would have made this flower any more beautiful, an unrealistic expectation in this case since *Blc.* Malworth has *Laelia cinnabarina* as a grandparent. Some people tend to forget that at the time this flower was shown, there was absolutely nothing that could compare in size and roundness of segments for a yellow cattleya. It is true there were more brightly-colored yellow flowers with fuller and rounder trumpet or brasso lips, but none of them even came close to the flatness, or near perfect symmetry that *Blc.* Malworth 'Orchidglade' exhibited when it was awarded. In my opinion, if any yellow cattleya deserved an FCC then, this was it.

Brassolaeliocattleya Lemon Magic 'Orchidglade II', a delightful cross between *Blc.* Golden Galleon (a large standard yellow) and *Cattleya aelandiae*, received an HCC of 76 points in 1981. This cultivar has a wide-open, intermediate lip that displays a beautiful balance between the different lip shapes of its parents. The remarkable contrast its bright purple column affords the lemon-yellow segments would be greatly diminished, if not altogether lost, had this flower had a standard labiate lip. This is most definitely a case in which a trumpet or brasso lip would *not* be welcome.

Cattleya Orlade's Classic 'Robert', AM/AOS 82 pts.) awarded in 1987, is a remarkable cross between *Cattleya* Spring Cloud (a third-generation *Cattleya walkeriana* hybrid) crossed back onto *Cattleya walkeriana* v. *alba*. Regarding flower shape, it could be said that the standard white cattleyas have long been considered as the pinnacle of desirability in the alliance. This cultivar is proof that the same degree of desirability can be achieved without a classic labiate or brasso lip. It possesses a charm and distinction that most standard white cattleyas often lack. I'm well aware there are no points allotted for subjective qualities such as elegance and charm in the score sheet, but judging is more than following rules and adding points. If that's all there is to judging, a computer would do our job far more effectively than we could. As humans, we have emotions that move us when we recognize beauty and repel us at the sight of ugliness, whatever it is that we consider beautiful or ugly. Some flowers have these subjective, unmeasurable qualities, and simply because they are not mentioned in the handbook or included in the score sheet doesn't mean we should ignore them. A good orchid judge should have the ability to

recognize these qualities, or lack of them, and act accordingly. It is precisely these unmeasurable qualities that in my view make the difference between an AM and an FCC, not just how far the measuring tape can reach.

It is time to recognize that an isthmus lip is not a flaw at all, much less a fatal one. It is a naturally-occurring shape. The lip, regardless of type, must contribute to the overall desirability of the flower, complementing or contrasting with the sepals and petals and enhancing the overall symmetry of the flower without distorting its proportions. Unfortunately this is a philosophy seldom practiced with bifoliate cattleyas. With the exception of some outstanding species and *Blc.* Malworth 'Orchidglade', I can't think of a single instance in which a cattleya flower with an isthmus lip was awarded an FCC. On the other hand, when it comes to most other orchid genera, we seem willing to be far more accommodating, as exemplified by the following First Class Certificates.

Phalaenopsis Sierra Gold 'Suzanne', FCC/AOS (91 pts.), 1984, is unquestionably a remarkable flower considering that it is a cross between *Phalaenopsis* Deventeriana and *Phalaenopsis* Mambo. Statistically speaking, it is a 50 percent *Phalaenopsis amboinensis* hybrid which would obviously preclude a full, round shape. Nevertheless, this is an outstanding cultivar, quite possibly the best of the cross. Now, let's consider the lip, a typical *amboinensis*-type lip, far from the wide lip of a standard phalaenopsis. Does it bother us that the side lobes are actually under the column as opposed to draping it on either side like a standard phalaenopsis lip would, or that the midlobe is so narrow? Why should it? It's a beautiful *amboinensis*-type lip. Then why should an isthmus lip bother us when it's only to be expected in certain cattleya hybrids? Sure, you can say that a phalaenopsis lip is far less prominent than a cattleya lip; however, let's not forget that lip shape is worth only three points in *Phalaenopsis* and five points in *Cattleya*, so at least as far as number of points is concerned, there's not that much difference. Would we have been as generous with the best of a bifoliate cattleya cross as with this phalaenopsis? True, just because a flower happens to be the best of a cross doesn't mean it automatically deserves an FCC. But it seems that this philosophy is more often applied to bifoliate cattleyas than to most other groups.

Another example is *Lycaste* Wyldfire 'Sanbar Big Red', FCC/AOS (90 pts.) 1989, truly a breathtaking flower of enormous size and exquisite lacquer-red color and texture. Did this particular flowering deserve an FCC? A bit doubtful in my opinion. First of all, I would have problems awarding an FCC to a *Lycaste* with only two flowers, even if they were from the same bulb. Secondly, there are quite a few cultivars of this well-known grex with much flatter and rounder sepals. I know it has been said a million times, but I'll say it again and again – size is only 10 points! Yet, knowing full well that flower shape counts for 30 percent of the total score, the tremendous size of the flower was apparently enough to blow the judges away, a generosity hardly ever afforded to isthmus-lip cattleyas. If we're to strive for an ever-improving judging system, I cannot stress enough the importance and significance of consistency of judging criteria.

I'd like to close by mentioning an anecdote I heard from Don Herman regarding Rex van Delden, the redoubtable Indonesian who was in charge of paphiopedilums and

phalaenopsis at Fred A. Stewart, Inc., many years ago. The story deals with a plant of a Malaysian *Phalaenopsis violacea* presented for judging at the Pacific South Region that had a perfect, equilateral star-shaped. Having seen more plants of *Phal. violacea* in his native Indonesia than probably anyone in the room, Rex refused to award this flower because he thought that the true beauty of this species was precisely in the bowlegged effect of the lateral sepals so particular to the Borneo-type *Phal. violacea*.

A similar argument can be said about cattleyas with isthmus lips such as *Cattleya amethystoglossa* 'Lea', AM/AOS (82 pts.) 1988. This flower is such an exquisite, delicate beauty just the way it is. If we try to breed out its beautiful isthmus lip, this innate elegance and grace can be so easily lost. We all have, and are entitled to have, certain natural preferences that can often cloud our judgment. It's all too easy to get carried away by the things we like and dismiss those that we don't. As AOS judges we cannot afford the luxury of judging only what we like. Part of the purpose of our judging seminars is to sharpen out faculties and broaden our knowledge. If our aim is to become better judges, then our standards must expand to accommodate the vast diversity and complexity of the Orchidaceae, and must evolve beyond the mere adding of numbers and unquestioningly following rules. Most importantly, we must stop enforcing certain judging criteria to some flowers while ignoring them in others. Consistency of judging criteria is the key to a better judging system.

Judging Bifoliate Cattleyas: A Proposal

It is imperative to be familiar with the type of an individual species in order to recognize superior quality as well as being well-acquainted with the species in the background of a particular hybrid and the traits each one is known to impart. This is especially significant in this section since the traits imparted to their hybrids by the species in this group can vary dramatically in all aspects and characteristics relevant to orchid judging. The judging criteria for quality remains as expressed in article 6.1 of chapter VI, Judging Criteria and Point Scales. The following recommendations are offered for consideration and discussion.

Flower Form

General Form

Keeping in mind that there is no such thing as perfect symmetry in nature, an isthmus-lip flower of a species or hybrid in the *Cattleya* alliance should be as close to it as can be expected of its type or line of breeding. The general aim remains toward flatness and fullness of segments as stated in section 6.1.1, *Cattleya and Allied Genera*, but the degree of roundness is to be determined by its genetic background, e.g., it would be unreasonable to expect a primary hybrid of *C. aelandiae* such as *C. Landate* (*C. aelandiae* x *C. guttata*) to approach the roundness of shape expected of a primary hybrid of *C. walkeriana* such as *Lc. Mini Purple* (*L. pumila* x *C. walkeriana*)
The sepals should be arranged in a nearly equilateral triangle, being as full as genetic background allows (keeping in mind that species such as *C. amethystoglossa*, *C.*

granulose, *C. guttata*, *C. schilleriana* and *C. velutina* all have lateral sepals with a more or less pronounced and symmetrical curving inward behind the lip and that such a trait can be expected of its hybrids), generally flat and without pronounced undulations or ruffles but usually with some degree of reflexing or curving forward to be expected according to line of breeding. This, however, should be pleasing and graceful, not distracting from the overall symmetry of the flower.

The petals and lip should be arranged in an inverted, nearly equilateral triangle. Petals should be as flat and full as genetic background allows, keeping in mind that the petals of all of the species mentioned above also display some degree of curving forward and/or downward, this often being transmitted to their progeny, and generally speaking, they should be broader than the sepals with some degree of undulation and/or ruffling along the edges, occasionally curving forward to various degrees according to line of breeding.

Judging Isthmus Lips

By definition, an isthmus lip has a midlobe that is distinct from the side lobes and separated by an intermediary segment which is a morphological extension of the midlobe and is known as the isthmus. The lip should present itself in a symmetrical arrangement, its axis forming a straight line with that of the dorsal sepal. The side lobes should be positioned opposite each other around the column, either draping it or exposing it (depending on genetic proclivities) in a symmetrically flattering fashion. The midlobe should descend gracefully from the column creating a pleasing downward curve without excessively recurving or projecting forward nearly parallel to the column (keeping in mind that species such as *C. aurantiaca* are known to impart the latter trait to their progeny). It should be generally flat and, according to its genetic background, possess varying degrees of ruffling along the edges, this should be pleasantly in concordance with the petals, either emphasizing or contrasting the presence or absence of ruffles in the petals, respectively, and complementary to the rest of the flower.

Flower Color

The color of the flower should be clear, pleasant and uniform throughout, with its degree of intensity to be determined by genetic composition in concordance with parentage. If color is of a new and/or unexpected hue or intensity, it should be attractive and distinctive enough to be considered an improvement over the expected progeny. If any patterns are present, they should complement and enhance the general color of the flower and be pleasantly and symmetrically arranged. Generally speaking, the lip should be darker and more intensely colored, blending or pleasantly contrasting with that of the sepals and petals. Any markings present on the midlobe and/or side lobes should be symmetrical, complementing or harmoniously contrasting with that of the rest of the flower.

Other Characteristics

Regarding flower size, the judging criteria remain the same as written in the handbook, to wit: "The size of the flower should be equal to or greater than the average of the parents. The potential of the species in size may already have been established by fine forms

discovered in their natural habitats (or artificially raised from selfing or sibling populations). In bifoliate crosses the size of the flower and the width of the petals (and sepals) will be less than in pure *C. labiata* crosses because of the difference in the species involved.”

Substance and texture can vary considerably in bifoliate cattleyas according to the species involved but generally speaking, substance should be heavier than in labiata-type cattleyas. Texture can vary from glossy (in hybrids involving *C. aclandiae*, *C. amethystoglossa*, *C. aurantiaca*, *C. guttata*, *C. schilleriana* and *C. velutina*) to leathery (in hybrids involving *C. bicolor* and *C. granulose*) to satiny (in hybrids involving *C. loddigesii* and *C. walkeriana*) and every gamut in between in intersectional crosses, including sparkling, crystalline and velvety.

Floriferousness is closely related to parental background and size of flowers. It is imperative to keep in mind the parentage of a hybrid when evaluating floriferousness since hybrids involving species such as *C. amethystoglossa*, *C. aurantiaca*, *C. granulose* and *C. guttata* are expected to have a greater number of flowers on a stem than hybrids involving *C. aclandiae* or *C. walkeriana*, this fact also affecting the arrangement on the stem, the former species having a more crowded presentation than the latter ones. It is important to remember that “Floriferousness” should not be confused with “Habit and Arrangement of Inflorescence,” a characteristic for which there is no consideration in the *Cattleya and Allied Genera* under section 6.1.1 of the handbook. The stem should be upright and strong, carrying the flowers well above the foliage and displaying them to their best advantage.

Bifoliate Cattleya Species

The following species form what is known as the *guttata* section of the genus:

- C. aclandiae*
- C. amethystoglossa*
- C. bicolor*
- C. elongate*
- C. granulose*
- C. guttata*
- C. intermedia*
- C. schilleriana*
- C. velutina*
- C. violacea* (syn: *C. superba*)

The following species are considered intermediary forms between the *labiata* section and the *guttata* section of the genus, having distinctive midlobes and side lobes but with a less prominent isthmus:

- C. dormaniana* (syn. *Lc. Dormaniana*)
- C. forbesii*
- C. loddigesii*
- C. walkeriana*

The following species are taxonomically considered intermediary forms between the genera *Cattleya* and *Encyclia*. They are included in this list because their progeny tends to exhibit isthmus-shaped lips to various degrees:

C. aurantiaca

Enc. Citrina (syn: *C. citrina*)

Enc. mariae

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