

This article was written in response to "Food for Thought: The Judges Commendation," by Ingrid Schmidt-Ostrander, which appeared in the March 2003 issue of Awards Quarterly.

The Judges Commendation: Another Perspective
By Andy Easton

Let me offer a contrasting and contrary view to those of my fellow judge. My thoughts are those of a senior judge rather than of an American Orchid Society employee. Ostrander and I surely have differing views in other areas besides orchid judging, yet it is important to reemphasize that judges are not, nor should they be, of one mind consistently, and it is through the exchange of experiences, ideas, even constructive argument, that we all expand our knowledge and become better-balanced judges.

I think that the Judges Commendation award is often a catch-all, cop-out award. Judges don't have to back their vote with any point level, and in my opinion, this encourages rather less critical evaluation than when one might be called to account. If the award was strictly used for noteworthy orchids that might otherwise fall through the cracks of the AOS judging system, it could come to have more value, but speaking as a sometimes exhibitor, the award is worth neither the paper it is printed on nor the accompanying bill from the AOS.

Maybe it should be a single-criterion award — unusual form, unique color pattern, or exceptional size, perhaps. Hardly for floriferousness (culture?), substance and texture if exceptional would point me to a quality award and rarity, why not the Certificate of Botanical Recognition? Unfortunately, with any award that is in essence "catch-all," there are always many of the gray areas that Ostrander alludes to. Sometimes I believe judges don't try hard enough to see whether a particular plant might actually better fit in a traditional award category and fall back on a JC to salve their consciences that a noteworthy orchid has not been completely overlooked.

The 1996 cut-off causes me no problem because it covers over 64 years of AOS judging. I doubt the last few years' awards will have in any way dented the dominance of color as the criteria nominated the majority of the time in support of a JC.

Let me work through Ostrander's examples, taking the devil's advocate role. Why give *Dendrobium pierardii* 'Oroville' a JC/AOS when the words "large plant" and positive comments on the flower presentation suggest, at least to this *Awards Quarterly* reader, that a cultural award could have been considered. I wonder which award the exhibitor would value more?

With the *Brassia brachiata* 'Erica' award, comments on "excellency of culture for the area" again suggest a cultural award should have been a possibility. Do we as judges really believe a *Vanda sanderiana* grown in Seattle, Washington should reach the same cultural standards as one grown in Miami, Florida? Perhaps it should, but the concept must be open to debate.

A JC for rarity is one of the weakest grounds of all. Rarity in nature, rarity in cultivation or rarity in the judging region? This is highlighted by the current status of Ostrander's two examples. *Paphiopedilum papuanum* is probably more rare now than in 1970, and has been of little value to Paphiopedilum growers, whereas *Paphiopedilum wardii* is still delightful, now far from rare and is becoming a very interesting and useful parent and grandparent.

Size, as evidenced in the example of *Scullyara Orchidglade* 'Orchidglade II', JC/AOS, may be close to the mark. The judges' supporting comments clearly show that they had considered the reflexing flower segments very carefully and realized that no quality award was feasible.

Form, in the case of peloric flowers, may be little altered or even an unstable mutation. Some of the *Cattleya* Alliance will have petals modified in their dimensions by peloria, others will not. *Cymbidium* pelorics are largely meristem misfits and often the characteristic is lost with further meristemming. Unlike in the *Cattleya* Alliance, *Cymbidium* pelorics result from a small appendage on one homologous

chromosome. Consequently, in the meringue of meiosis, the appendage is lost and no inheritance occurs. I have not seen any cytological studies on peloric *Cattleya* Alliance members, but both homologues must carry genes for the phenomenon.

When I see JCs for a group of species, even primary hybrids, I think the award is well employed. If an exhibitor goes to the trouble of educating the judges with a range of color forms, examples of varying dominance in hybrid characteristics, they earn my vote and gratitude.

New lines of breeding and the application of JCs and ADs deserve discussion. If judges think a new hybrid monogeneric or intergeneric is commendable, they should commend the hybridizer rather than the exhibitor. The AD should be reserved for the unusual and distinctive plant of the bunch rather than a type. I have gotten into friendly arguments with Cymbidium Society judges who persist in granting ADs to spotted Cymbidiums. They were unusual and distinct 20 years ago, now they are a type with some shapely enough to be considered on their own merits. A white Cymbidium with green spots would easily get my vote for an AD, but after I'd seen the next couple my mind would wander to more exotic possibilities.

I am glad my friend put “(and valid?)” when considering other reasons for granting a JC. Could not a *Paphiopedilum ciliolare* be given a cultural award for a truly outstanding long stem, or does this border on an unsightly disproportion? Do all cultural awards have to be given just to bigger and more heavily flowered specimens? As in all areas of judging, we work toward consensus among judges of differing minds.

I smile at the reference to *Lycaste* Darius — some of us doubt it is the true hybrid, but rather a shy-blooming *Angulocaste*.

A very worthy candidate for DNA analysis if any scientist is short of work.

Ostrander's discussion of color in JC awards is brought into sharp focus when revisiting the relative importance of shape and color in quality awards. An elder judge took me strongly to task for speaking out enthusiastically in support of color. No amount of argument could sway him. But color and shape were arbitrarily weighted evenly when our system was in its infancy. What catches the eye first, shape or color? What catches the public's eye? I can hear it now “who cares about the public's taste?” I suggest we ignore them at the peril of judging's increasing irrelevance to the greater orchid world. If color was weighted at 35 percent and shape at 25 percent, many of the JCs for color would fit more easily into traditional award guidelines.

Far from being relegated to an equal place, color might be elevated to its rightful place and the JC could be more precisely focused on criteria that should be recognized and that are worthy and commendable in culture and breeding. I stress breeding because I feel hugely inadequate in commenting on something produced in nature.

My compliments to Ingrid Schmidt-Ostrander; she put pen to paper and inspired me to do likewise. If these point-counterpoint exercises are to have any value we would hope to receive and stimulate comments from those in the judging fraternity. We've put our heads well above the trenches — shoot us down, dazzle us with differing views, but best of all, become more thoughtful and effective judges.

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