

The Subject of Student Judges Revisited
By David L. Grove, PhD

In her instructive article in the June 2005 issue of *Awards Quarterly*, entitled “Guide for a Student Judge,” Aileen Garrison, I think, leaves the readers with an impression that may be interpreted as being tantamount to saying that “students should be seen but not heard.” That may not be her intended position but I believe my characterization of the impression the article gives is fair and is supported by certain unambiguous statements by the author. More specifically, she asserts that, in AOS judging, it is the student’s “responsibility to provide the judging team with all available facts,” except that, she understandably adds, certain kinds of facts, such as material taken from a vendor’s brochure, are not acceptable. This is followed by the statement that “Neither are opinions of the student judge presenting the information acceptable.” She explains that, for the student to do otherwise, would be to “prejudge the plant” and that the student’s comments could be “construed as an attempt to influence the decision of the judges.” The student’s job is to “collect the facts and present those facts to the team.” The student’s opinion should be neither asked for nor volunteered, she maintains.

Garrison’s views on the proper behavior and role of student judges carry special weight because she currently serves as chair of the Judging Committee. For that reason, I would like to present another point of view, which should be taken as no more than a personal one; however, it is fully in accord with the practices of the Northeast Judging Center, where I have served for many years — practices I believe serve the judging system well.

In my judging center, the student providing the factual background information is expected to conclude the presentation with an opinion about what action he or she thinks would be appropriate. If the student does not volunteer such an opinion, he or she generally is asked to do so. We want to see the extent to which the student is capable of making reasonable, well-informed and independent judgments. Specifically, we want to know whether the student thinks the plant he or she has researched should be rejected and not even point-scored, and, if so, why? Or, if the student believes that the plant should be scored, why? What features does the plant have that support or should preclude consideration for an award? What type of award would be appropriate for consideration (e.g., CBR or CHM, or a flower-quality award, or a cultural award), and why?

The data the student has selected from what sometimes is a mountain of available information should be carefully chosen and focused to facilitate a thorough discussion of the plant’s strengths and weaknesses by the judges. So should any slides the student has elected to show. The student should be able to justify the selections of data and pictures he or she has made, and their relevance. For example, if a *Vanda sanderiana* forma *alba* is on the table, should the data the student presents about flower size, etc., be limited to previous awards only to cultivars of that same color form or should it include awards to the typical color form as well? How much information about the parents should be included in a particular instance? If there are many previous awards, should a distinction be made between those plants awarded in recent years and those made many years ago, or should no such distinction be made? Should data on only the plants with the highest scores be presented, or should there be broader representation? The facts selected and presented to the judges in a given case can reveal quite a lot about the student, but generally only if the judges can question the student about his or her reasoning and conclusion, if they wish to do so. If the student possesses personal knowledge that appropriately supplements the factual material, this too should be presented. After all, some students have considerable knowledge about certain genera and species and we all benefit if this knowledge is shared prior to point scoring.

One important reason for exposing the accredited judges to the capability of each student to make independent assessments is that the judges should be in a position to evaluate the student’s performance and progress fairly and accurately when it comes time to do so at the next personnel meeting. In this regard, it is particularly important that accredited judges be exposed to the student’s demeanor and temperament, and the interactions with the judges who are his or her peers. As Garrison well puts it, we want to know if the student is “capable of making independent assessments . . . but at the same time . . . recognize the merits of the opinions of other judges.” But how are we to determine this if the students never have to express their independent judgments and participate in the discussions about the plants presented for judging? To

become an effective judge, one must develop the ability to form knowledgeable judgments and communicate them to one's fellow judges in a manner that will contribute to consensus and never rancor.

Some students start out with a tendency to be too cautious and passive. While such students may never display any gross ineptitude, and for that reason may succeed in being advanced to probationary status, there is a risk that even after promotion they may seldom add anything to the collegial process of AOS judging. At the other extreme is the hyperactive student who, if given the chance, soon will reveal that he or she is too vocal and assertive. Developing the right balance is not easy; it requires a combination of practice and guidance from the student's advisers. The earlier that practice begins the easier it is for the experienced judges to evaluate a student's potential and to provide any needed guidance; moreover, in the student stage, the individual is more likely to be receptive to suggestions for improvement. Delays in identifying a need for remedial action with respect either to factual knowledge or demeanor serve neither the student nor the judging program well. And if it becomes evident that the student, for whatever reason, is not likely ever to be able to develop into an effective judge, the sooner the individual is advised to withdraw from the program the sooner the severance can be accomplished with a minimum of embarrassment to all concerned.

Finally, the judging system requires a steady infusion of the best talents the orchid-growing community can provide, but what motivation does a knowledgeable nonjudge have to enter the program if he or she is expected to serve a minimum of three years in a position in which his or her independent judgments are considered to be worthless? Not much, so some of the best potential candidates for the judging program may decline to apply.

In conclusion, the reasons for encouraging rather than frowning on active participation by students are compelling.

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