

Judging Cut and Cuttable Inflorescences

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A considerable number of orchid genera, though certainly not all of them, produce inflorescences that can suitably be cut for display and submitted in that form for AOS judging for flower quality. When that happens, how are such inflorescences supposed to be scored when they are being compared with inflorescences that are attached to the plant? A number of flower-quality awards have, in fact, been granted to cut inflorescences — even some FCCs.

The *AOS Handbook on Judging and Exhibition* (11th edition) appears to mandate that scoring always should be based on comparisons of the qualities of the flowers of a single inflorescence and that is the standard that judges are supposed to use, regardless of how many inflorescences the plant may have. Unfortunately, in practice, this is not the standard that all judges apply, perhaps out of insufficient awareness of what the standard really is.

What are the provisions of the handbook that appear to support what I believe is the correct interpretation of its intent? Chapter 5, Section 3, under the caption “Submission of Plants for Judging,” makes it explicit that either blooming plants or cut flowers may be submitted. This provision is supplemented by Section 5, which sets forth the guidelines for “Judging Practice.” In its Subsection 1, under “Definitions,” it is stated that “Entry is the means by which an inflorescence is brought to the attention of the judges for their consideration,” and later, in Subsection 4 of the same section, “point-scoring is the final stage of judging in which an inflorescence that has not been screened out is considered for an award through the use of the appropriate point scale.” It is important to note that both these citations specifically use the term “an inflorescence,” and not “inflorescences.”

In considering whether the sole basis for comparisons should be the qualities of individual inflorescences, we should examine the implications both of imposing that standard and of not imposing it. One issue that arises immediately is the question of the number of cut inflorescences an exhibitor may present and represent as coming from the same plant. This question would be moot if there were unanimity among the judges that the standard for judging is a comparison of the flower qualities of single inflorescences. Otherwise the question of the permissible number of cut inflorescences has to be addressed, and it would be a thorny one, especially with regard to the judges’ dependence on the truthfulness of exhibitors about the true source of the extra inflorescences they are submitting.

Another and more difficult issue is whether a cut inflorescence shall in every respect be judged exactly as it would have been had it been presented as a single inflorescence attached to the plant. In other words, should the point score come out exactly the same in the two situations? The handbook nowhere contains any provision that would suggest that an inflorescence may validly be penalized or handicapped as a result of being presented

in cut form. Nor does it contain any provisions that could be interpreted as inevitably resulting in such discrimination, with one exception I shall explore later.

There is a solid rationale behind both the permissibility of cut inflorescences and a requirement of nondiscriminatory treatment of them; they advance the aims of AOS judging. The main purpose of flower-quality judging is to enable the orchid-growing community to be made aware of the levels of excellence that have been achieved by the best exemplars of each of the many recognized species and hybrids. In order to facilitate this objective, it is vital that presentation of inflorescences for judging not be unnecessarily burdensome for exhibitors, some of whom live far from judging centers or have fine plants that would be discouragingly difficult to transport to and from the judging centers or that could be transported only with considerable risk of damage. Permitting exhibitors to submit a cut inflorescence without any handicap is a constructive inducement to participate. In practice, however, it seems that some judges do penalize cut inflorescences somewhat and at some judging sessions I have heard judges volunteer that they had done so.

Notwithstanding its virtues, a system of judging that endeavors to make cut inflorescences fully competitive with those of multiple-inflorescence plants in the way described above faces a real dilemma: it achieves consistency only by excluding from consideration some flowers and inflorescences that may contribute significantly to the overall impression a plant gives to its viewers.

What other judging system might be adopted that would avoid this problem? One obvious way would be to aggregate the flowers of all the inflorescences and treat them as a single group. In practice, it seems that some judges and centers operate that way, at least with regard to attached inflorescences. That system would have the standard for comparison of contending plants be the flowers of the entire plant, rather than just those on its best inflorescence. But that is not what the handbook seems to prescribe. A consequence of such a system would be that the measurements of flower size reported in the award description might be those of the largest flower on any of the plant's inflorescences, while the best arrangement of flowers might be found on some other inflorescence. Similarly, the flower with the best shape might be found on still another of the inflorescences. If the award description scored each quality in this fashion it would be presenting a composite image that oftentimes would not accurately portray the actual appearance of any of the individual inflorescences.

Under such a system, a single cut inflorescence from a multiple-inflorescence plant generally would be at a considerable disadvantage whenever it was compared with a composite formed by a "cherry-picking" treatment of multiple-inflorescence plants. Moreover, plants with just a single attached inflorescence often would be unduly handicapped when their flower size and shape were being compared with those features of plants with more than one inflorescence. This issue becomes an even greater source of concern when one considers that some flower qualities tend to be correlated with certain others, either positively or negatively. For example, on a plant with more than one inflorescence, the largest single flower is more likely to be found on one that bears

considerably fewer flowers than are present on the one with the most flowers. In such a situation, the cherry-picking approach would enable the plant to get the benefit of a high score for flower size without being adversely affected by the smaller number of flowers on the same inflorescence. Conversely, in some other circumstances a cut inflorescence could have an unfair competitive advantage, because the exhibitor would be able to exclude from the judges' view any inferior inflorescences from the same plant. A judging standard based on the qualities of individual inflorescences, therefore, contributes to making the playing field more nearly level for all entries.

Another approach that at first blush might appear to have considerable merit would be to score the qualities of each of the inflorescences of a plant and report all the findings for each of them separately. But that would be burdensomely cumbersome, and nowhere does the text of the handbook or the score sheet lend itself to an interpretation that such an approach would be acceptable. When the measurements and other information of previously awarded plants are read aloud at judging sessions, it already is difficult enough to absorb them and use them as reference points in evaluating another plant or inflorescence, particularly when the amount of time the judges can give to each plant often is tightly limited. The last thing the judges want is greater complexity.

To require, therefore, that only a single (and implicitly the best) inflorescence of a multiple-inflorescence plant be point-scored is a defensible and sensible compromise, even though it is a somewhat circumscribed method because it excludes any flowers not on the chosen inflorescence. Its great merit is that it provides greater comparability of results than would alternative approaches. That feature is vital for a judging system that must operate with many widely dispersed judging centers and in which the judges all-too-often have only limited opportunities for direct interaction, with the result that they must rely heavily on the published record for comparisons with plants judged in centers other than their own.

Now we come to the one troubling exception to which I alluded earlier. It pertains to the criteria for scoring "floriferousness." This component of the total point score is governed by the definition given in the glossary in Chapter VIII and in the text of Chapter 7.5, which prescribes the rules to be followed in using the score sheet. It states there that the figures to be reported for floriferousness are "the total number of flowers, the total number of buds and the total number of inflorescences on the plant." This aggregation is inconsistent with the rest of the Handbook if the intent is that what is to be judged is a particular inflorescence whenever a plant has more than one. Consistency requires that the same standard be applied in every respect and not in every respect except floriferousness. To make matters even worse, the score sheet does not even require that the number of flowers and buds attached to the inflorescence that was chosen for point-scoring be recorded, and it almost never is. Does it make any sense to design a system in which the scores for flower size, shape, color, and arrangement all must be those of the flowers of a particular inflorescence while simultaneously measuring floriferousness by the aggregate number of flowers on all the inflorescences combined? The components that comprise the basis of comparison for competing plants should be consistent with one another. This inconsistency in the handbook could easily be remedied by simply

requiring that the number of flowers and buds of the selected inflorescence always be stated and that the number of flowers and buds of each of the other inflorescences be appended as supplementary information but should not affect the point score for floriferousness. No one would dispute that it is useful information that should be made available.

In summary, judging of any sort usually involves making comparisons and rankings in situations which contain elements that are not strictly comparable in all relevant respects, so the result has to be an occasional compromise and acceptance of less than ideal solutions. Comparisons of the flower qualities of single inflorescences, irrespective of whether they have been cut or not, appear to have been established as the frame of reference in the AOS system of judging. That provides a workable system that has a solid rationale undergirding it, with the single exception I have noted. It strikes a tenable balance of the host of considerations that judges have to take into account in deciding how highly to rate the flower quality of a given plant in the hierarchy of previously recorded plants — most of which the judges have never seen and for which they therefore have to depend to a considerable extent on a published record. The framework should not be vulnerable to conflicting interpretations, but presently it would appear that it is. To cite one illustration of the compelling need for clarification, a fairly recent issue of the *Awards Quarterly* contains the following statement in the award description of a *Vanda*: “inconsistency in flower size and shape between inflorescences reduced score.” Moreover, one of the judges involved is reported to have remarked afterwards to the exhibitor that “The flowers I judged were worthy of an FCC award but the other two spikes had flowers that only merited an AM, so I had to mark off.” (The exhibitor, who runs a commercial nursery, quotes this statement on his web site, not as a complaint but out of pride that his plant nearly received an FCC). Clearly the judges in this situation did not use the standard for flower-quality judging that I have described and defended in this critique. Moreover, I have witnessed other similar cases. But were those judges wrong? The underlying issue, to repeat, is whether a plant should be scored solely on the basis of its best inflorescence or on the basis of all of its inflorescences collectively. Both of these approaches cannot be legitimate. If the award scores are to have any value as benchmarks for comparisons and rankings, all judges must sing from the same version of the hymnal. But which one is that? There obviously is a need for more guidance and better understanding of the intent of the rules that are supposed to prevail.

