

The Fatal Flaw – A Proposal

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This paper is being submitted in an effort to define and encourage the incorporation of the fatal flaw into the screening portion of AOS judging practice.

Fatal flaw is defined as a single defect so severe and so glaring that the entry being judged is eliminated during the screening process by unanimous decision of the assigned judging team.

If there is more than one “fatal flaw” to an entry, there is usually no disagreement about screening it out because of the inevitable low point score. With a single fatal flaw, the score for only one major point scoring category may be very low, but the total score might possibly be more than 75 points. The reason for this apparent discrepancy is that the fatal flaw is not part of point scoring, but occurs earlier in the overall four-step process of AOS judging. This would allow judges to use the fatal flaw as a factor even though an entry may garner more than 75 points if point scoring were to be carried out.

Judges should be especially cognizant that an award entry will be photographed. These photographs and slides will be reviewed by others. Any eye-catching flaw that greatly detracts from the better qualities of the flower will be seen by others as a fatal flaw. Hopefully we will see less of these distractions in the future when judges are no longer forced to issue a low scoring award strictly by points just because a plant has been nominated.

In a slightly different vein, certain characters or traits have been selected for and improved with time in the advanced hybrids. These quality traits are now expected. Slightly poorer variants may be awarded in the absence of a fatal flaw, but with lower scores. However, grossly poorer variants should not be awarded. These entries can be screened out or scored below 75 points.

The general direction for form is toward fullness, roundness and flatness (when viewed from the side) to the extent possible within the type.

Some fatal flaws, with regard to form, may include:

- Missing floral parts – missing lip, petals, etc.
- Extra floral parts – four petals, two lips, etc., except for split synsepals in paphiopedilums
- Open form in advanced or complex hybrids
- Unnatural ridging of the segments, especially when all flowers are involved, since this flaw may be genetically induced.
- Excessive cupping (forward) or reflexing (backward) perpendicular to the segment midline
- Excessive rolling of segments forward or backward parallel to the midline

- Excessive plane variance for the type. For example, an advanced standard cymbidium with the correct petal stance of its *Cymbidium erythrostylum* ancestor
- *Phalaenopsis* with drooping midlines which give the appearance of sad, tired-looking flowers
- Unbalanced or asymmetric flowers with a few exceptions such as *Mormodes*. Problems here become painfully apparent in photographs.

The desired qualities for color are clarity, brilliance and intensity of pigmentation, possibly with some bias toward basic colors. Problems with color seem to become magnified in the award slides.

Some fatal flaws with regard to color may include:

- Washing out of standard cattleya base color along the midvein
- Excessive muddiness which appears as unattractive gray or brown staining
- Color break
- Mottled, blotchy or unbalanced color. Pelorics are exempt if they are symmetrical
- Excessive fading as flowers mature on an inflorescence. This does not refer to senescence.

Desirable inflorescences should tend toward strength and toward displaying the flowers well, whether their preferred form is upright, arching or pendent.

Fatal flaws involving the inflorescence may include:

- Missing lateral branches on the inflorescence
- Many missing flowers
- Crowding of the flowers which severely interfere with resupination and anthesis
- Short flower pedicels which distort their flowers against the inflorescence or interfere with resupination and anthesis.
- Bent or crippled inflorescences which are visually disturbing
- Excessive spacing of flowers for the type
- Relatively long, bare inflorescences with a tuft of a few flowers at the apex, as in some *Phalaenopsis lueddemanniana* hybrids.

Size is usually not a fatal flaw unless the flower is much smaller than the geometric average while its vegetative growth is relatively very large, resulting in undesirable proportions.

Fatal flaws involving floriferousness (depending on the genera) may include:

- Having fewer than half of the flowers on the inflorescence in bloom. In some genera such as *Phalaenopsis* it may be difficult to determine fading or arrangement on an immature inflorescence. Alternately, the exhibitor can be notified early on that the entry may be withdrawn from judging and the same inflorescence allowed to be brought back for judging later.

- Having too few flowers, i.e., much less than the geometric average of both parents. For example, labiata-type cattleyas with only one flower per inflorescence.

Fatal flaws of substance may include:

- Excessive floppiness in which segments droop because they cannot support themselves. This may be due to lack of water, or very thin or soft substance.
- Brittle segments such as those found in some brassias that break off with only a slight touch. Desirable textures are crystalline, velvety and waxy.
- Textural problems include a dull or matter surface which usually will result in a lower score, but generally is not a fatal flaw.

Miscellaneous individual problems that disqualify an entry may include those caused by the exhibitor such as failure to correctly label the entry, or to list previous awards, or submitting plants with an insect or disease problem. Even though these are noted during screening, they are not classified as fatal flaws.

When is a flaw fatal? When it *greatly* detracts from the good qualities of an otherwise awardable entry. An exhaustive, ironclad list cannot be drawn up for judges to follow since the degree of severity of a flaw is important. A time-dependent, sliding scale should be utilized to determine this. Well-developed lines should be judged very strictly as there are many high grexes available in various breeding lines. By contrast, newer less-developed lines should be encouraged, guided along and judged more leniently according to their level of excellence today.

Further reading:

Handbook on Judging and Exhibition, Ninth Edition. American Orchid Society.
Gerber, Marvin, and Jerry Stephens, MD. "The Fatal Flaw." *Awards Quarterly*, Vol. 21, No. 1, Spring 1990, p. 30.
Berliner, Ben. "Judging by the Book." *Awards Quarterly*, Vol. 21, No. 3, Autumn 1990 p. 179.