

The “Pros” of Mall Shows

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The majority of orchid shows in Florida are staged in shopping malls. Personally, as a judge, I find mall shows an abomination. But mall shows are here to stay! Why? Exposure...People...Money!

The purpose of a show is to introduce people to orchids. People will go into a shopping mall who won't go to a show in a bank, a hotel or an auditorium. In addition there will be some viewers who visited the mall on other errands.

There is so much competition now for leisure time and entertainment dollars that few free-standing orchid shows (the Miami Show excepted) which charge admission attract enough visitors to support the show expenses and the sales booth.

Sales booths are a point. A show needs commercial exhibitors to put in the large displays, and commercial growers need customers for their sales booths. They have to make money.

Speaking of money, malls pay orchid societies money. What do they want in return? People! They want the show to bring people into the mall. There is great competition among malls for customers and dollars. The orchid society must use every possible outlet available to nonprofit organizations to advertise the show and bring the people. Newspaper, radio, television, posters, everything.

I know about orchid shows. In 40 years of staging shows, the Jacksonville Orchid Society has tried all options. All were successful at their time but some would not be practical today. We began with a “guest exhibit of orchids” in the annual camellia show, a big horticultural event in the 1940s. Then we had bank shows with exhibits but no sales. Next we staged several shows in the large auditorium of the Garden Center. We paid rent, charged admission and had sales booths. In time, sales began to dwindle.

Now we show in a shopping mall. Interestingly enough, this year we shifted our site from a huge regional mall to a smaller mall in an area near upper-middle-class neighborhoods of relatively permanent residents. It was the best show we have ever had from the point of attendance, impact and sales (in the show and in the stores).

People came in droves and were amazed that orchids were not all purple cattleyas or yellow Mother's Day cymbidiums. They asked questions, bought plants, came back with friends and families, and bought more plants. It was a huge success because of the impact and exposure of the orchids. Somewhere among those people are many of the orchid growers and orchid society leaders of the future.

Now about judging. I was once on a team that had to look at sixty-six (that's right, 66) equitant oncidiums in a mall show. This one class took more than an hour of walking. An

extreme case, but in many mall shows judges must walk for hours on hard floors. In Jacksonville we have relieved the problem somewhat, and I recommend this procedure to other all shows. We use knowledgeable orchidists for ribbon judging which goes on simultaneously with American Orchid Society judging. The key to speed is that the commercial exhibitors do not enter individual plants in their exhibits for ribbon judging. Having buckets of ribbons at home, commercial exhibitors are delighted not to fill in all those entry tags during set-up. This cuts the work of the entry committee, too. Thus only plants in amateur and orchid society exhibits are considered for ribbons. The clincher is that every plant in the show is eligible for the trophies, and of course all exhibits are canvassed for A.O.S. nominations. Every exhibit is considered for the A.O.S. show trophy. We finish judging at noon, serve lunch, and the judges can get home at a reasonable hour.

It you stage a beautiful show and get the crowds to come, a mall show is a good thing. Many people will see the orchids. The mall will invite you back. The exhibitors will come again. And people will buy plants who never ever thought about growing orchids. Some of them will “get hooked,” as all of us did sometimes, somewhere.