

Odonts – The Classic Orchids

By Ned Nash

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Temptation is alive in the world of orchid judging. Among the many and varied shapes and types of orchid flowers, including the shaped tending toward fullness and roundness, or more toward oval, triangular, oblong, or just toward odd, round flowers best capture the classic orchid shape. And there is no better representation of round flowers than the odonts (*Odontoglossum crispum* and related hybrids, *Odontioda*, *Odontonia*, *Vuylstekeara* and *Wilsonara*), several of which are illustrated in color on the back cover of this *Awards Quarterly*.

If we think about those flowers judged on a generally rounded form, including cattleyas, cymbidiums, dendrobiums and odontoglossums, all are judged using the general point scale, with sepals, petals and lip contributing equally to the points for shape. However, if we consider flatness of form ideal, three of the four types have a glaring fault: the lip rolls or protrudes to some extent. The lip also is often out of proportion to the sepals and petals. Only in *Odontoglossum crispum*-based hybrids do we find the truly perfect flat, rounded and proportionate form that is considered ideal in orchids.

Odonts are the ideal spray orchid, especially when the blooms are flat and well-rounded, of clear color or boldly patterned, and borne well-shingled, perfectly arranged, on an arching spike. How many orchidists and how many judges can fail to be both tempted and impressed by these orchids?

Unfortunately, not many people outside of the cooler areas of the United States, especially the Pacific Northwest and the Northeast, have ever seen one of these plants well-grown and at its best. Those who have know just how lovely they can be. Those who have not seen many are often easily swayed by well-grown average clones. Awards that may not be justified, based on the current state of the breeder's art, are unfortunately given.

Indeed, it can be said that the odont industry is only now re-attaining pinnacles of achievement that were initially reached in England during the middle part of the century. The success of those well-known orchid hybridizing firms such as Charlesworth's and Mansell & Hatcher continues to be seen as extraordinary and admirable.

Modern genetic information is enabling today's breeders to overcome some of the problems with aneuploidy that didn't plague earlier breeders to the same extent as in the '70s and '80s. Breeding with plants of even ploidy (number of chromosomes), whether tetraploids or diploids, is giving more seed and uniformly better flowers, resulting in widely available quality odonts, a new situation. This excitement can lead to over-awarding average clones. History provided a similar scenario when vinicolor paphiopedilums or the Chinese *Paphiopedilum* species were first introduced. The temptation to over-award is entirely understandable. However, knowledgeable judges, consistently on guard, know they must draw on their experience before presenting awards. Less-experienced judges can perform a creditable job of evaluation. This is due in part to the limited amount of genetic material utilized in the makeup of most odonts and the fact that they are primarily round flowers.

Whatever the color or combination of colors, it should be crisp and distinct. Many odonts are exotically patterned, and such patterns should be crisp and clear, with distinctly

delineated markings and clear color. White, pink or red odonts should be definite in color, with no muddiness or brownness caused by underlying pigments. Yellows and oranges can be forgiven some slight imperfections of color purity owing to the species background. Shape should be round and full. Pointed tips to sepals and petals should be considered a fault except in hybrids influenced by *Oncidium* background. Lips should be flat and full. Excessive curling or frilling is often seen, and should be considered a fault. Most modern odonts should be expected to be at least 8 cm in overall width, with segments proportionately broad. If a higher percentage of smaller-flowered species are in the background, such as *Odontoglossum pescatorei*, *Oncidium tigrinum* or *Cochlioda noezliana*, small flowers are acceptable, but only if there are significantly more of them. Standard odonts should have eight to 12 or more flowers shingled in two ranks – not crowded or too far apart – on an upright, arching spike. Smaller-flowered types should have more flowers on branching spikes, which are often more upright.

Judges should be aware that many complex odont mericlones are appearing in the United States without varietal names, resulting in the awarding of the same clone several times under different names. Just like in cattleyas or cymbidiums or any other orchid, there are many fine and beautiful odonts in this group that you would love to take home. The descriptions and photographs published in *Awards Quarterly* serve as an excellent reference in determining which clones deserve awards. After all, as beautiful as they are, not all odonts can be awarded. Tempting though, isn't it?

Ned Nash was director of education and conservation at the American Orchid Society.