

Taking the Guesswork Out of Show Judging

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Most judges are aware of the increasing number of orchid plants being marketed through “non-traditional” outlets such as Home Depot. Most are also aware that the labeling of these plants, if labeled at all, may be suspect at best. Many of these plants come from sources whose breeders, while concerned for the commercial qualities of the plants they are producing, are unconcerned with the traditional niceties of the established registration system. The registration system that gives the American Orchid Society awards system, with its stated purpose of recognizing improvements in type and breeding, its basis. Technically, unless we can know the breeding history of a plant, we cannot properly judge it.

In some cases, a sheet is provided to the growers of these plants with suggested hybrids for the various types, saying, in effect, the white ones may be...; the pink ones may be..., etc. Certainly, experienced growers may be able to fairly accurately affix proper hybrid names to many of the plants based on their experience with the particular parents, but in a significant portion of the crosses, their guesses are educated and no more.

There is, within the leadership of the American Orchid Society and its judging system, a feeling that we (the AOS) should promote named orchids to the exclusion of all else. In cases where the plant is perceived to be of award quality, a name is obviously essential. But, and this is a big one, we are now dealing with a new class of orchids, and a new class of consumer, where the exact hybrid name is peripheral to the interests of the breeder or the consumer. How are such plants, when exhibited within the traditional system, to be treated? When we see such a plant at our local regional judging, there is a judging form attending the plant giving a parentage. In this case, we are bound to accept the word of the exhibitor as correct, unless it is obviously false based on the collective experience of the judges present. The difficulty arises, and has arisen, at shows where exhibitors do not necessarily enter each plant, not do they exercise complete care in labeling each plant in the display. In cases such as these, it is up to the judges present to interpret the information provided regarding parentage. Where the plant in question may have originated from one of these purely commercial sources, that information may not be of the necessary quality to enable the judges to evaluate the plant in question. How then to handle the disappointed exhibitor who hears that his plant “would have been considered, but...”

There are several interrelated issues here. First, how does the judging system handle plants with no, or questionable, parentage? Second, what is the responsibility of the judging system in maintaining the integrity of the registration system? Third, what is the final responsibility of the judging system to its final “customers,” the exhibitors, regarding their incompletely labeled plants? Do we, as some have suggested, simply manufacture a new class in judging, a class of “pot plants” where parentage does not count for anything? If we do, how can we even begin to consider plants in this class for AOS awards under our existing system? Neither the American Orchid Society, or its

judges, have any desire to be the “orchid police,” handing out fines or citations to those who exhibit plants thought to be incorrectly labeled. We can, however, encourage vendors to insist on properly labeled plants from their suppliers. However, these same vendors may be unwilling – to put it mildly – to pay the higher costs that would probably be associated with the increased administrative burden of keeping track of the correct names. Simply put, the traditional orchid buyer is a vanishingly small portion of the market sought by these new commercial interests.

There are no answers to these questions yet. Nor has the judging community done any more than begin to consider the ramifications of this onslaught of new and questionably labeled plants. The judging community does need to consider how to handle situations such as those outlined above, and it does need to openly discuss these issues. Honesty on the part of the exhibitor must be assumed, even to the point of his saying “I don’t know” about a plant in the display whose parentage is unknown. We might hope that as the percentage of award-quality progeny increases from strictly commercial hybrids, so will the awareness of the importance of the breeding records on the part of the producers. This is probably naïve, though. If we want to maintain the integrity of our system, we need to address these points. Talk about it at your next regional judging; it will save some embarrassment later.