

Looking At Something Different

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How tastes alter is a fascinating subject. What was thought to have been “writ in stone” in one generation becomes, quite frequently, “writ in water” in the next. Since judging orchids is largely a process of confining the responses of taste within words and numbers — the judgment itself — the concept of what is good, better, best in orchids is a highly variable and evolving definition.

Have any other judges also noticed a certain tendency to be a trifle unnerved when something “different” is placed on the judging table, something about which one exclaims but for which one can find no previously recognizable judging standards? In other words, “it is lovely, but what do we do with it?” Personally, I rather enjoy becoming unnerved at a judging session, even if it requires saying “I’m having a little problem with this plant.” Being unnerved means that some original response may be required of me. I think it is fair to say that, after some time of training and experience, judges can assess many types of orchids long familiar to judging circles with comparative ease, assurance and accuracy. This is part of the job, and I would seriously doubt that any judge today feels great difficulty in judging a “typical” lavender cattleya, large spotted paphiopedilum, or massive phalaenopsis, etc. If difficulty exists, it is probably within one of two areas: continuing to award a “type” of hybrid whose general standard is obviously high but in which no real change or “improvement” appears to be occurring, or judging a flower which challenges us to grade it 85 points or higher.

While certainly rigorous and exacting, most judging is done on fairly familiar territory. It is only when the territory becomes a little less well-known, when a judge must take a step into *terra incognita*, that the process of judging becomes both unsettling and, possibly, more exciting. Consider how long it took, what prejudices had to be overcome, before Paphiopedilum rothschildianum hybrids could be considered for awards with the fervor experienced in the past decade. Study the recent awards granted to phalaenopsis, and marvel at how many small, jewel-like clones are now being recognized in comparison to fifteen years ago.

None of this came about overnight. Today’s judges are probably no more “liberal” in their viewpoints than those of thirty years ago, who gradually came to appreciate the fact that not all top cattleyas needed to be white or lavender, thus leading the way to today’s rainbow attitudes. The acceptance of difference — or perhaps, more accurately, no longer seeing something as “different” and therefore as less desirable — is a gradual process. To be sure, when somatic hybrids become a reality, we may be asked, overnight, to make quantum leaps in judging attitudes. But by and large, new trends acceptable to judges almost come upon us unawares, as judging by judging, we get used to a new detail, a slightly different color hue, the fact that spade lips on *Cattleya* hybrids whose edges do not roll up around the column are not, after all, the heresy we once believed! This is possibly the better way, for such a careful, slow, unrevolutionary altering makes for the

existence of a continuum of perception, rather than a series of markedly divergent attitudes.

One of the most influential trends in hybridizing affecting judging is the move towards “miniaturization.” All of the clones from this issue, selected to appear in the centerspread, with the possible exception of the small but not tiny *Paphiopedilum* Chipmunk ‘Vermont’, AM/AOS, represent varying achievements in “miniaturization” within their genera. A careful study of this issue will also reveal that these clones are far from alone in their diminutiveness. How will such increasing hybridizing efforts bear upon the judging process?

One result may be the refocusing of attitudes towards the concept of size, as expressed on judging scoring sheets. Size, at least in the way it appears to have been interpreted, is one of the more unfortunate bugaboos which the present judging system has inherited from the past. The antique tendency to judge bigger as better, a gift from the days when hybridizer’s were primarily commercial growers and the flower market demanded massive blooms to display on imposing bosoms, has been, on occasion, a major stumbling block to the recognition of excellence in almost every genus. Proportion and harmony of segments, rather than their individual size, would seem the more valid, more expansive approach.

The easiest way to circumvent an acquired inclination to praise the large to the detriment of the less large is to judge a genus or hybrid cross in which there is no “biggest,” in which, in fact, “biggest” is not even part of the hybridizing attempt. Since the converse attitude does not appear to come as naturally to mind — award the very smallest clones you can find — the eyes of judges are forced away from size as an isolated consideration and towards proportion as a reflection of the beauty of the entire flower. Theoretically, the category for size on judging scoring sheets could varnish. How can you award points for big versus little when these words no longer matter?

Cymbidium Doris Dawson ‘Emerald’, HCC/AOS and *Cymbidium* Alison ‘Valentine’, AM/AOS are examples of mini-*Cymbidium* hybridizing — and awarding — which have become fairly well accepted today. (The number of [or lack of] F.C.C.’s to mini-cymbidiums may cause more than one judge to consider whether “massiveness” of bloom has been, possibly, the final characteristic which can push a clone over the edge from an A.M. to an F.C.C.) How are we going to respond to the many new hybrids involving the often tiny, usually different shaped, Chinese *Cymbidium* species? We have seen a few over the years. Occasional clones have been awarded. If *Cymbidium* hybridizing expands greatly in this direction — and the predictions are that it may indeed — adjustments in taste within a genus noted for a very traditional judging attitude will either have to be consciously made or will occur over a period of time almost before we are aware of it. If such does not occur, we shall miss out on a great area of obvious, but nontraditional beauty.

Phalaenopsis Parma ‘Liberty Hill’, JC/AOS is quite possibly an extreme example of the awarded, nonstandard phalaenopsis. The fact that the clone received a Judges’

Commendation apparently for Charleswortharas, epicattleyas, cattleytonias, beardaras — all are receiving flower awards today, in limited numbers to be sure, but the awards are occurring. This most exciting, for in many, quite important ways, clones of such complex hybrid genera by and large have no precedents by which their judging might be influenced. The clones exist almost *sui generis*. This means that the judges can come reasonably unencumbered to their assessment. With such clones, new attitudes have a chance of being born. And it is with such clones that the excitement of being a judge, of having to articulate aesthetic responses largely unaided by tradition or formula, of being, as it were, on one's own, truly comes to the fore. Such moments are rare and should never be evaded.