

Improving Awards Descriptions and Photography
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As editor for American Orchid Society publications, I bear the burdensome responsibility — some might call it blame — for establishing uniform standards in style, format, grammar, and punctuation. Overall, the *Awards Quarterly* is a remarkable achievement shared by judges, regional photographers, Awards Registrar, and editorial staff. However, to invest the *Quarterly* with even greater uniformity and consistency, and to engender esprit de corps among judges and photographers who make the Awards Quarterly what it is, I would like to advance some constructive and well-intentioned suggestions on writing awards descriptions and on photography.*

DESCRIPTIONS

The most troublesome and perennially controversial line of any description is the name under which the plant is awarded if it is a species. Apparent whims of taxonomists in generic revisions and specific name changes very often have a rational, accurate foundation in the International Code of Botanical Nomenclature. That the names seem to change every day reflects the dynamic nature of our knowledge of orchids as more and more data become available through technology. Name changes also parallel the dynamics of plant populations themselves through millions of years of continental drift, volcanic action, and climatic changes. As one example, consider Indian orchids. Fifty million years ago, India was joined to South America and Antarctica. After it broke away, India drifted northward to collide with Asia, causing the uplift of the Himalayas. You might ask, “So what?” But think of the impact on the flora of India as temperatures and rainfall fluctuated in those millennia. The result was an extremely diverse orchid flora, made even more so by migration, mutation, and man’s manipulation. Is it any wonder, then, that taxonomists come to different conclusions in their search for the past?

On the other side of the coin is the need for stability in nomenclature, if only for the sake of effective communication. This is the goal of the International Orchid Commission, which recently published the third edition of *The Handbook on Orchid Nomenclature and Registration*. The issues raised here are implicit there also, as we encounter two names for many species — 1) the botanically correct name and 2) the horticulturally recommended name steeped in tradition. My purpose here is not to dispute the validity or discount the value of the *Handbook*, but to point out that two sets of names can be just as confounding and frustrating as adoption of a new scientific name for registration purposes.

For instance, what do we do with *Epidendrum* and *Encyclia*? As early as 1961, Robert L. Dressler grappled with that megagenus *Epidendrum*, which for decades after its description by Linnaeus in 1753 served as a convenient catchall for names of new orchids discovered “on trees.” Dressler correctly saw a natural genus *Encyclia* submerged in *Epidendrum*. The two genera differ significantly in floral structure (see Dressler’s 1974 book *The Genus Encyclia in Mexico*) and as a consequence are adapted to completely

different pollination systems — *Epidendrum* to moths, butterflies, or hummingbirds, and *Encyclia* to bees or wasps. Presence of pseudobulbs is not an absolutely reliable character to use in distinguishing the two, since there are some true epidendrums with pseudobulbs, such as *Epi. ciliare* and *Epi. stamfordianum*. *Encyclia* has witnessed widespread acceptance over the past 11 years and has been adopted by all A.O.S. judging centers, even though *The Handbook on Orchid Nomenclature and Registration* still recommends the use of *Epidendrum* for horticultural and registration purposes. So what are judges to do? To me, whether or not the new name has “stood the test of time,” whether it has earned general acceptance and usage, should govern our adoption of it in awards registration. *Under these circumstances*, I would propose that the botanically correct name take precedence over the horticulturally recommended, e.g., *Encyclia tampensis* over *Epidendrum tampense*. This is a practice that most A.O.S. judging centers already follow.

What, then, do we do with our intergeneric hybrids, such as *Epicattleya* and *Epilaelia*? Since most of these are actually crosses using *Encyclia* instead of *Epidendrum*, do we change the hybrid names to something like *Encycattleya* and *Encylaelia*? Not only would such a decision require transfer of thousands of names and generally cause inconvenience of catastrophic proportions, but also, somehow, tradition dictates that *Epicattleya* remain unchanged and inviolate.

The next information that should appear in a description (following the award, points received, and parentage) offers the most latitude and, therefore, deserves the most attention here. After number of flowers and buds on number of inflorescences, flower color usually is described as precisely as possible. The Committee on Awards has ruled against the use of color chart numbers in awards descriptions because 1) which color chart should serve as the standard is unclear and 2) many regions and individual readers do not have access to the color charts.

More attention should be paid to the mechanics of descriptions in an effort to be precise and concise. “Nice” is not precise. The word “nice” is vague, subjective, useless, and trite. Remember also that “species” is both singular and plural in the botanical sense. Further, there is no need to wax poetic in descriptions, such as “a quantum leap beyond other awards...” or “white lip faintly spotted with lilac gives the impression of a monkey’s face...” These phrases are great for the general public but really have no place in an awards description. Nor do references to highly technical parts of the flower (e.g., rostellum, clinandrium, column foot) unless defined using *An Orchidist’s Glossary*, published by the American Orchid Society.

For conciseness, we can save space by eliminating the extraneous words — the articles, verbs, and pronouns. There is no need to write “the shape is round, the substance is heavy,” but simply “round flowers of heavy substance.”

Special awards are required to have the rationale for the award included with them. Descriptions of species or natural hybrids receiving a Certificate of Botanical Recognition should explicitly include why they are worthy of such recognition. Awards

of Quality should be substantiated also. Why does the plant deserve an AQ? How many cultivars of the grex have received flower quality awards? Certificates of Cultural Merit should be given for something other than “well-grown plant,” which is inherent in the award. What is the condition of the foliage, for instance? Judges’ Commendations should be commended for something. What? Why is a species receiving the Certificate of Horticultural Merit worthwhile horticulturally? In granting HCCs and AMs, it is very helpful to point out *in a constructive way* why the flower did not score higher, such as petals drooping, sepals and petals not overlapping enough, or color not as definite and clear as that in other cultivars. To call a flower canine is not useful or courteous. Some criteria in judging are frequently omitted from descriptions altogether: substance, texture, and arrangement of flowers on the inflorescence. The last of these is important, particularly for cymbidiums and vandaceous genera.

Descriptions are ended by natural spread of the flower, with metric dimensions of dorsal sepal, petals, lateral sepals, and lip. Although natural spread is usually measured horizontally, some genera, such as *Phragmipedium*, with a significant vertical spread require mention of vertical measurement as well as horizontal, to read something like “Natural spread of flowers 6 cm horizontal, 14 cm vertical.”

PHOTOGRAPHY

Photography remains one of the most critical aspects of the judging process. An adequate picture is itself a valuable part of the description. Only training, experience, and many, many rolls of film can guarantee acceptable standards of photography. Commends below are founded on years and years of personal trial and error, using enough film to employ 50 people at Eastman Kodak for one year with full benefits, including a three-week paid vacation in Monaco. If a mistake can be made with a camera, I have made it at one time or another. The *one* error I have not committed (but which others have) is to open the film cassette under a light after finishing a roll to check the quality of exposures.

There are three major factors in producing good awards photographs: exposure, composition, and focus. Only one point about exposure need be made. **Do not expect one exposure of each plant or flower to suffice.** Even when you think you have a foolproof system worked out for exposure, bracket, bracket, bracket, usually one F-stop above and one F-stop below the meter reading given from an 18% gray card. Do not skimp with film. Whether or not we have a good exposure in our files determines if an awards photograph is seen around the world or seen by no one. Color of the background and of the flower will require some exposure adjustment. We receive many black-and-white photographs of white flowers taken at exposures more suitable for darker flowers. When a white flower reflecting the flash is photographed wide open from a distance of six inches, the result looks like a quasar. Remember: for light flowers and light backgrounds, stop down.

Substandard composition is the second most often seen fault in awards photography. The goal here is not to be artsy but to portray the flower or plant straight-on according to its award, orientation, or size. Photographs of specimens receiving the C.C.M. should

obviously include as much of the foliage and as many of the inflorescences as possible. Vertically oriented flowers, such as phragmipediums, some bulbophyllums, and draculas, should be framed vertically, not horizontally. On the other hand, horizontal flowers should not be framed vertically, leaving wasted, empty space at the top and bottom of the photograph. The goal is simply to fill the frame as much as possible without eliminating necessary elements, such as petal tips or lip. Do not shoot a *Pleurothallis* flower with a wide-angle lens. It is wise to have extension rings, a macro lens, and/or bellows on hand for the miniatures.

This brings us to focus. Soft-focus pictures are fine for art posters and calendars but not for awards. Focus sharply on the flower(s) rather than leaves marked by fertilizer salts.

About the best advice I can relay is to adopt the practice of professional photographers. Do not just aim and shoot like a tourist. Once you have composed the picture, focused, and determined the proper exposure, stop! Stand back and look at the whole scene anew. Quickly run through your mental checklist of exposure, composition, and focus. Are there better ways to frame the shot? Is a label, stake, or ribbon showing? Is the backdrop suitable? From experience I know that dark flowers are lost and frequently underexposed against a black background. Avoid gagging background colors not founding nature on planet Earth. Personal favorites are black or blue backgrounds for white or brightly colored flowers and light beige for darker flowers. Now look through the viewfinder again. Is there a mealybug on the flower? Is there a breeze that will ruin your best attempts to focus? Are you photographing the best flower? All these reconsidered, shoot.

I hope that these recommendations are helpful, for as outstanding as the Awards Quarterly already is, there are areas needing slight improvement. Awards Registrar Ken Peterson, Chuck McCartney, and I will be happy to answer almost any question concerning awards nomenclature, descriptions, or photography.

*I wish to thank Jim Riopelle, Chairman of the Committee on Awards, Ed Boyett, Chairman of the Photography Committee, and Awards Registrar Ken Peterson for helpful input and suggestions.