

The Philosophy of Judging

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The Handbook on Judging and Exhibition recommends that the "The Philosophy of Judging" be incorporated into all training programs for American Orchid Society judges. There does not seem to be a source that enunciates or suggests what aspect of philosophy should be taught or espoused and it is expected that one would not get a very uniform view from the present judges as to what philosophy or what aspect of philosophy is applicable to judging flowers. The views might well range from procedures and policies to be utilized to a much more academic definition. I once heard philosophy defined as "the search for the truth." This would seem to be an applicable concept where judging orchids is concerned because the central question is what award does the plant warrant, if any. Certainly, such aspects of philosophy as ethics and logic are germane to making judgments that are factual and supportable. Following is my perception of some factors that a judge must possess or know before making factual judgments.

Central to our philosophy must be the reason that a judging system even exists. The Handbook on Judging and Exhibition answers this question fairly competently when it states something to the effect that the purpose of the judging system is to encourage people in all phases of orchidology. Another way of stating this is that if judging orchids is to serve a useful purpose, then granting recognition to plants and to people associated therewith, should encourage people to further all facets of endeavors associated with orchids. Is it not equally important to preserve those plants that produce rather innocuous flowers as it is to preserve those species that produce the generally accepted truly beautiful flowers? The answer is obvious. The entire range of possibilities must be covered.

Central to the issue of having judges who are truly qualified to make factual judgments are the qualities absolutely essential for the prospective judge to possess, as well as the knowledge already gleaned or that can be gained.

Any prospective or current certified American Orchid Society judge must have an aesthetic faculty if he or she is to be a qualified judge. Obviously, if one cannot recognize actual beauty, one doesn't possess the most fundamental quality necessary to be a judge. Assuming this observation is true, and it seems obvious that it must be, then those persons passing judgment on another person are faced with an awesome dilemma.

How does one determine the degree to which another possesses a purely subjective quality? This is especially awesome when it is relative to people involved with the orchid family since the diversity of color, form, size, etc., is so large. About the only way one can deal with this important aspect is to utilize the consensus of opinion of a group of people who are presumed to be able to recognize actual beauty, or the lack thereof, when they see it. Everyone who must make these judgments is placed in a tenuous position because they are faced with making a decision that is based upon a presumption that may not be fact. It is suspected that very few people possess an aesthetic faculty to the degree that is desirable to function as an exceptionally competent judge. Clearly this area is a very argumentative one, with no finitely correct statements that can be made - and proved to be correct. Nevertheless, one should be aware that it exists, and we should increase efforts to be more cognizant of its existence when selecting new judges.

Ideally, every judge should be free of bias and prejudice. Unfortunately, this is never the case. Bias and prejudice come in all forms and with respect to all things. If we are to make competent judgments, everything must be done to eliminate beliefs and ideas that are detrimental to ascertaining the facts. Everyone should be able to recognize, and to some degree, be able to control their biases and prejudices. The fact remains, however, that some people prefer certain colors, sizes and forms, etc., over others, encompassing the entire gamut of diversities found in orchids. How does one deal with these human qualities?

One simple answer is for an individual to disqualify himself or herself when he or she is aware of specific prejudices. If one doesn't find a particular genus, e.g. *Paphiopedilum*, to be appealing, the obvious thing is to not make judgments on plants within this genus. Another, somewhat more difficult-to-achieve-method of dealing with bias and prejudices is for the chairman of judging to refrain from assigning a plant to be judged to be one or more individuals who might not find some fundamental aspect of the flower to be appealing regardless of its qualities. If one dissects this phenomenon to the most finite degree, the logical conclusion is that judges should be certified to judge only certain genera. The fault with this line of thinking is that there are certain persons who have no particular prejudices or favorites, equally qualified to judge all genera with their almost infinite variations. They could be classed as some type of master judge. The prudent individual is bound to reject this latter line of reasoning because it is inherently unwise to have a caste system in something as restricted as our judging system. Probably a caste system is unhealthy in all circumstances, but this line of argument is not relevant to this discussion. What is relevant is that bias and prejudice exist and they must be dealt with or the truth will not be achieved.

A very important human trait that influences whether or not one can reach a valid and supportable truth is attitude and emotion. How many people can really remain coldly objective at all times? Are there not some who would let their emotions unduly influence

their judgment if they viewed for the first time a flower that, to them, was new and of unsurpassed beauty? Conversely, would there not be some who would view rather negatively a flower that really deserved recognition for the elementary reason that they had seen similar flowers over a long period of time and had thus become too familiar with genus, color, size or type of flower? Although it overlaps another facet of reaching valid judgments, a good example that is presently occurring can be cited. How many judges had viewed a reasonable population of *Paphiopedilum armeniacum* when a FCC/AOS was awarded to the first one that had been presented for judging? Since this occurred in this writer's region, he knows that all were viewing this species for the first time. Considering, the subsequent equivalent awards to this species, it is not unreasonable to assume that it was the first *paphiopedilum* the judges had seen that possessed a yellow flower, and this fact generated undue influence. Because yellow is a generally pleasing color, could this fact have led to a rather emotional conclusion?

Another similar example is the recent awards to the red-flowered *Phragmipedium besseae*. The intent here is not to say that attitude and emotion are irrelevant to making supportable judgments. After all, isn't it an emotional as well as sensual experience to view anything that one perceives as beautiful? One should simply be aware of the need to exercise reasonable control and not be "carried away." In short, one needs to see a representative population of a species or grex before any valid judgment can be made.

Associated with the preceding discussion is the phenomenon of judging one's own plants, plants owned by one's employer, etc. The Handbook on Judging and Exhibition, for good and just reasons, prohibits a judge from judging a plant with which they obviously have some close connection. This is allied with judging plants whose owners are known to the judges. Can a judge arrive at a supportable award for a plant belonging to an individual that is personally distasteful to the judge? This would lead to a lengthy dissertation because some judges would be influenced and others would be objective. Hopefully, most would be objective since the owner of the plant is totally irrelevant to the quality of the plant. It should be remembered that when a plant is presented for judging, the only thing that matters is what award, if any, the plant should receive.

Probably a not-too-frequently-considered fact is that attitudes can be created. Consider a person walking into the judging area making a comment to the effect that the plants available for judging are a rather sorry-looking group of junk. Despite the fact that all judges should be able to make independent judgments based upon their own knowledge, perceptions and experience, it is a fact that people are influenced by the conduct of others - some positively, others negatively. Discussion or comments within a judging area, as well as during the judging process, should be limited to factually, finite statements, both positive and negative, based upon one's own knowledge and expertise. Further, everyone should

remain cognizant of the presumption that other certified judges are qualified, and extraneous opinions are not needed unless elicited.

Central to arriving at a consensus that is at least nearly factually correct is that those people making the judgment must possess a vast amount of knowledge. It is impossible for any one person to possess enough knowledge to be truly competent with all species and hybrids. However, a certain amount of knowledge is absolutely essential. Every judge should have sufficient knowledge to know that if presented with a full-formed, large, dark purple flower, labeled (*C. araguaiensis* x *C. iricolor*), the chances are negligible that it is correctly labeled. One just cannot evaluate something without knowing something - actually, a lot - about its origins. Thus, it is clear that one must know the species and also have a broad knowledge of the hybrids. It is clear and not argumentative that to be a competent judge, one must be a devout student of orchidology.

A good example to illustrate the point is that in recent years a number of awards have been granted to *Vanda coerulea*. A few have been FCCs and several highly scored AMs. Now ask yourself, who knows *V. coerulea* the best - Thais or Americans? How many FCCs have the Thais and Americans? How many FCCs have the Thais given to this *V. coerulea*? Remember, they have been thousands. American Orchid Society judges have granted awards to plants of this species that are so ordinary they would be sold for a few baht in Thailand. To compound the errors, several of the plants awarded are not even *V. coerulea*. The errors made are so contrary to the facts that it is obvious something has failed.

Obviously, everyone cannot visit every nursery regularly, even in their own country, but everyone can read books, study magazine, view slides and photographs, study catalogs, visit many nurseries and collections and maintain such activities with a view to learning so their knowledge will be greatly enhanced. Any judge who does not do these things cannot possibly keep current and thus, judgments will frequently be flawed.

In summary, a competent judge must be objective, remain coolly unemotional within limits, be ethical, possess vast knowledge, have no aberrations in vision that aren't corrected, and probably several other traits. It is not an easy task to be a competent judge; one must continually strive to keep abreast in these fast-moving days in orchidology.