

The Granting of Cultural Awards

By Robert Webster Jr.

Published in Awards Quarterly Vol. 19, No. 3, 1988, page 150

The judging of plants for cultural awards is somewhat different from the judging of flowers for quality awards. For flower quality awards, a judge typically selects blooms that visually appear to be exceptionally high quality for their type and breeding. A team of judges then uses the appropriate point scale to determine if the bloom is worthy of an award and, if so, which award.

Judging for cultural awards usually occurs somewhat differently. The team of judges usually concurs that a plant's culture is worthy of such an award and the score sheet is used to indicate the number of points it will receive. More often than not, the decision to grant a Certificate of Cultural Merit (CCM) is made without looking at a score sheet.

This system works quite well for the experienced judge who has attended hundreds of judging events and has seen thousands of flowers. For the less experienced judge or student, some question frequently exists as to whether a plant does, indeed, represent a specimen worthy of a cultural award. This is especially true if the plant is of a genus or species not commonly encouraged in an area.

The eighth edition of the AOS Handbook on Judging and Exhibition gives us a general summary of expected characteristics for a cultural award. But some specific guidelines may be useful, especially for the less experienced judge.

The first question to ask is whether the plant under consideration is truly well grown or just big. Given time and reasonable growing conditions, almost any plant can be grown to a large size. The handbook, however, specifies that a plant must be "of robust health and appearance" in order to qualify for a CCM.

Such a plant should be relatively easy to recognize. The root system, where evident, should be vigorous and of good color. The stems and pseudobulbs, where present, should be plump and turgid. Wrinkling may be characteristic of some species but the growth will be firm to the touch. Likewise, the leaves should be turgid and reasonably free of damage from sunburn, disease and insect infestation. The plant must, of course, be completely free from any active insect infestation or disease.

Except in deciduous types, virtually every pseudobulb should bear healthy leaves. Plants of a monopodial growth habit should have leaves not just at the top but well down the stem

(unless, of course, it is a typically leafless species). Both sympodial and monopodial plants should be well-branched where appropriate.

Plant color is also important. While the shade of green may vary among different genera, it should be brilliant, never pale or faded. Even healthy plants with naturally gray foliage, such as some of the brassavolas, will have a certain vibrant look to their color.

The determination of a plant's condition should be made before any attention is given to the flowers. A big plant may produce a large number of flowers without necessarily being in good condition culturally and a cultural award covers much more than flower count.

This is not to say that the flowers are not important. Their condition, quality and number are all important. As in judging for quality awards, the majority of the blooms should be open and mature. They should be reasonably free from defects, although in a massive blooming, the chances for an occasional aberration seem to increase. This should not be pronounced but the presence of one imperfect flower in a massive blooming should not prevent the granting of a cultural award.

The individual flowers need not be of award quality but they should be of at least average quality. The handbook indicates that flower quality account for 20% of the score. In actual practice, most judges simply require that the individual blooms be of average or better quality. Of the characteristics of the flowers, color is generally held most important. It should be clear and brilliant and should show well from a distance.

Finally comes the all-important question of how many flowers are enough for the plant's culture to be worthy of a CCM. For the less experienced judge - and certainly the average grower - this may seem somewhat bewildering because the number of flowers may vary so greatly from genus to genus and from one species to another.

There is a good rule of thumb to follow, however. Consider how many inflorescences and flowers you generally would look for on a plant worthy of a quality award. Such an award may be granted to a single flower, of course, but usually we expect the plant to have more blooms. The number of blooms varies, of course, but it is usually fairly easy to recognize. Plants in the genus *Rhynchostylis*, for instance, usually produce two inflorescences with 35-50 flowers each. Vandas may produce a single inflorescence but we prefer to see two. And two flower stems certainly can be expected on an *Ascocenda*. Labiate cattleyas frequently bloom on a single lead, while we like to see at least two inflorescences on bifoliate. The list could go on and on.

For a plant to be worthy of a CCM, expect 7-10 times this many flowers for an award in the 80-point range and 15 times as many for CCMs of 90 points and above. Of course, there are

exceptions to this rule, where a really massive plant may have many times that many flowers. But that is certainly the exception and not the rule.

Exceptions also occur in the other direction, with a small plant being so well grown as to be worthy of an award. But in general, if a plant is well grown as a small specimen, it will be much more worthy of a cultural award with a few seasons growth. A review of the CCMs granted by the AOS over the years shows that they generally fall into the ranges discussed above.

The Certificate of Cultural Merit is a very worthwhile award and any grower should feel honored to receive one. We must always strive, however, to see that we are, indeed, recognizing true cultural quality and not just big plants so that the award achieves its intended purpose.