

Award Quality

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We could liken the entire mass of judged orchids to an iceberg. Those of high quality to which awards are given would ride above the waterline, above the submerged plants which are not. One significant AOS award, rarely given, has the singular ability to make us readjust the level of quality, has the singular ability to make us readjust the level of quality we distinguish with our awards: Award of Quality. A prime example is illustrated by *Phalaenopsis* Brother Supersonic, AQ/AOS, shown on the back cover of this Awards Quarterly.

A definition for the Award of Quality is provided by the *AOS Handbook on Judging and Exhibition, 10th Edition*:

“6.2.6 Award of Quality (AQ)

Awarded once to a cross, exhibited by a single individual as a group of not less than 12 different clones or the inflorescences thereof, of a raised species or hybrid which may or may not have been made before, when the result is a sufficient improvement over the former type. At least one cultivar exhibited must receive, or have received, a flower quality award. It is granted unanimously without scoring by the judging team assigned. The specific values for which this award is granted must be recorded by the judging team. If the hybridizer and exhibitor are different, each shall receive a certificate. The Award of Quality is not given a cultivar name.”

The dry, prosaic definition above for the Award of Quality from the *AOS Handbook on Judging and Exhibition* barely hints at the prestige conferred on orchid growers when granted this award. It actually denotes a remarkable achievement in the fields of orchid breeding and cultivation, whether arrived at by art or by science. And, with anything that involves living things, people and exhibition calendars, a degree of uncertainty may be at play as well.

Only occasionally does a population of siblings from a crossing of two parents (whether of the same species or from differing species or hybrids) rise above the standards of its parent flowers or their general type. Most populations may show only an occasional individual that excels in quality and becomes a plant valued far more than its workaday siblings. However, a few result in a high number of superior clones and can earn the Award of Quality. This award has been granted to such crossings at various stages in their careers: as groups of first-bloom seedlings when there is clear evidence of a desirable improvement in quality, even though the awarded clones in their group received just a Highly Commended Certificate due to their immaturity; as groups of mature plants nurtured by the grower until they could be shown together at their peak of flower quality in one triumphant swoop, some earning individual merit awards as high as is likely; and as a group of previously awarded plants brought together in a sort of exclusionary family reunion (only the clan's top successes need attend). The Award of Quality to *Sophrolaeliocattleya* Hazel Boyd came in this way, long after most of the exceptional cultivars were individually awarded.

Amassing enough quality cultivars of one crossing to qualify for this award can be a daunting feat for most amateur growers. One would have to be lucky enough to have 12

plants in flower and of sufficient quality and condition at one time to meet the requirements of exhibition. Not surprisingly, commercial growers are most often the exhibitors to achieve this. Raising hundreds of plants from one crossing is an everyday task for those who mass-produce flowering plants. While screening a block of plants for flowers of quality, a savvy grower can guess if there will be enough to show for an Award of Quality.

Earning an Award of Quality would certainly be an intriguing goal for a hobbyist. Certain types of orchids may be more accommodating than others, when space and expense are considerations. Early-maturing plants of small habit such as equitant oncidium or masdevallia, or subtypes of cattleya, phalaenopsis or paphiopedilum with these characteristics, might be candidates for a concerted campaign. In lieu of raising seedlings of one's own species or hybrid crossings in large numbers, someone with promising parent plants might find a nursery that would raise them and allow the breeder's selection of quality flowering plants in return for supplying marketable populations for the firm's everyday trade. Or, divisions or mericlones of at least 12 cultivars of a particularly often-awarded crossing might form a focused collection in hopes that enough might bloom at once for the big day. A narrow flowering season would be of great value in ensuring simultaneity of bloom.

In judging groups of orchids for this desirable award, the definition from the *AOS Handbook on Judging and Exhibition, 10th Edition*, holds the keys to most of its criteria. Is there sufficient improvement apparent over the type of which the crossing is part? Has at least one of the group present received an AOS award? If this is not demonstrable, the award cannot be given. Are all the cultivars present from the same crossing? Conceivably, a ringer from a different crossing of the same species or hybrid may be filling a slot in the group. The intent is that all the cultivars in the group be representatives of a population raised from two particular cultivars, e.g. all from *Cattleya rex* 'A' x *Cattleya rex* 'B', and none from combinations involving any other *C. rex*. It would be highly useful to record the cultivar names of the exact parents used, to distinguish the awarded crossing from others bearing the same grex name. Similar attention must be given to ensure the originator of this crossing is correctly identified. A hybrid may have been made more than once. The originator, if different, as well as the exhibitor of the group, is to be presented with a certificate. The registrant of a hybrid's name cannot be automatically assumed to be the hybridizer of the awarded group. Surely, someone will produce superior population of a species or hybrid of which an earlier crossing received an Award of Quality. Can another be granted, if it is better? The definition says, "...once to a cross...of a raised species or hybrid which may or may not have been made before..." Equating "once to a cross" with excluding all possible combinations in raising other populations with the same name could be viewed as a deterrent to improving a type. While awards are not the sole end of raising improved flowers, should we deny awards to later improvements? Let's not be forever rigid. In a parallel vein, multiple Awards of Quality should be possible among differing subtypes within a species or hybrid. An Award of Quality to a vinicolor strain of a paphiopedilum should not preclude granting another to an albinistic strain notably superior to other albinistic paphs. Eventually, everything can be improved in quality. The Award of Quality denotes a major stride forward in flower improvement. Therefore, each Award of Quality-winning crossing should help form a new, higher standard against

which all others of its type are judged. These multilevel award winners, a group of plants awarded individually and en masse, tell us that they are now the tip of the quality iceberg, what the best look like. It is time to move up and no longer award those of now-submerging, old standards. After all, add to the top of an iceberg and the lowest exposed level sinks underwater as the entire mass subsides to equalize its buoyancy. If an iceberg becomes top heavy, it becomes unstable and overturns. As judges, we must maintain our iceberg's stability as its form changes beneath our feet, lest we overturn with it.

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