

The People Part of the Judging System

By Donna Craig

Published in Fall 1985 Awards Quarterly, Vol. 16, No. 4, page 212

The American Orchid Society judging system consists of people and their evaluation of plants and blooms. The judges represent a small group — only slightly more than 500 including student judges. That's a mere 2% of the membership of the American Orchid Society and an even smaller percentage of all orchid growers. Yet those men and women composing this 2% wield a tremendous influence on the world of orchids. It is the judges who largely are responsible for establishing the standards by which the orchid world develops. This is an enormous responsibility that must be taken seriously.

Judges must be committed to the judging system and to its orderly evolution. Thus, when a student doesn't "fit it," her or she must not be allowed to continue — and thereby weaken the system — just because he or she is a "nice" person who makes valued contributions in other areas of orchid service or because it would be a shame to hurt the student's feelings.

The men and women from across the country who make up the judging system give an incredible amount of time and energy and money to the study and assessment of orchids. This assessment is made based on rules established by other volunteers, members of the A.O.S. Committee on Awards, the Committee on Affiliated Societies, and the Trustees. These people constantly evaluate and revise the *Handbook on Judging and Exhibition*. In spite of their diverse points of view and differences in background, their work yields a remarkably consistent result. It is a minor miracle that the system works at all. But it works beautifully.

The judging system, which now includes relatively standardized requirements for accepting new students, training the judges, and keeping records of performance, has developed slowly but consistently through the years. As with most volunteer activities, progress is slow. For instance, these standard requirements went into effect in January 1977, 8½ years ago, and most of our judging regions are still trying to comply full with them. The regions are still trying to comply fully with them. The system is fragile and can be damaged easily and quickly. Thus, it is vital that we comply with the guidelines in the *Handbook* and select judges to meet the requirements of the Society and not just to serve their personal ambitions.

Occasionally, student and probationary judges mistakenly believe that elevations are recommended on a quota basis, regardless of performance. This is untrue. To prevent a surplus of judges, admissions to the program should be limited. We want all students to succeed, and a good student adviser is dedicated to a student "making it" as a judge. But, as Ernest Hetherington has said, not all students are destined to become judges. Some people seem to be born with "good judgment." Some people can be trained to acquire it. But some never do.

When experienced judged told me that I had to learn the system and work with it, a part of me took that to mean: 1) go along with the crowd, 2) give every plant 78 points, 3) don't ask questions, and 4) don't act like you know more about a plant or flower than the judges.

Not one of the above preconceptions proved to be correct, and all of these notions do a great injustice to the judges. "Getting along with people" does not imply some loss of

personal standards. It *does* mean recognition of senior experience. It *does* mean learning how to take a stand without being argumentative. It *does* involve a large measure of respect for one another. And it means taking a moment to thank those people in the judging system who make it possible for us to learn. How many times have you written a note of thanks to speakers, workshop organizers, or the authors of articles in the *Awards Quarterly*?

High standards of ethics and integrity are crucial. As we judge, so we are being judged by all who observe the process. We must ask ourselves if all our actions, words, and even personal appearance are a credit to the system.

As for scoring plants, it might be well to remember that “justice” is a man-made concept, not a natural law. It is quite likely that many of the plants presented for judging do not receive “justice.” What they must receive is “fairness.” If a plant or bloom gains the full attention of a judging team — their thoughtful consideration of the plants’ qualities — then that plant or bloom has been judged fairly.

Does this mean that we should disregard those instances where we feel the flower received less professional consideration than it might have? Not at all. First you’ll want to ask questions. If you have trouble in this regard, examine *how* you ask the questions. Are you showing proper respect for the point of view of another person? Listen to your tone of voice.

After you have asked your questions, then get to work. Research the material brought before your judging team. Follow up with additional home study. Make yourself a better judge so that when you do become a part of the system as an accredited judge, you will be in a position to improve the system.

Student judges spend a lot of time and money. It’s frequently inconvenient to go to your regional judging center and to attend shows. But students must remember that the judges have been doing this — and more — for many years. The only reward to the judges lies in the fair appraisal of the orchids submitted. They are doing their very best — even when students may think it’s not good enough. Students should make this same kind of commitment themselves

The A.O.S. judging system is a proud system. We should be proud to earn our place in it.