

World Orchid Conference Judging
By Peter R. Furniss

The one thing you can always count on is a great hue and cry at the conclusion of World Orchid Conference (WOC) judging.

No matter where the WOC is held, what type of system is used for judging, who is in charge, who assists, what takes place or who actually judges, complaints abound. Fingers are pointed at the WOC organizers, the host country, the trustees of the WOC Trust, the Royal Horticultural Society or the American Orchid Society. I'm sure there are other groups that also get castigated but I can't think of them at the moment.

For the longest time, I was sure all the grumbling was being done by AOS judges but now know that this is not the case. Others have joined the fray so it has become an international fracas.

Everyone needs to understand that WOC judging is up to the organizers of the particular WOC. They may select anyone they choose, no matter what qualifications, to judge the event; that's their prerogative. Ribbon judging in the United States is not, repeat not, AOS judging; and it can be done by whomever the host society wants. Likewise, WOC judging does not fall under any particular judging system so the organizers are free to choose whatever discipline they want.

I have been to eight WOCs and at every one of them some of the judges were unhappy and wanted to expound on everything they felt went wrong to everyone they knew (as well as those they didn't). Some of the complaints, certainly not all inclusive, have been:

- whether or not plants are entered
- will plants in displays be judged if there is separate individual judging
- who is or is not considered qualified to judge
- why can some resolutions group be able to come along behind the judges and change some things
- why do judges have to register for the WOC before they can be eligible to judge
- what constitutes "legitimate" judging credentials
- some of the team captains are not qualified
- judging manuals are unclear or not published
- the system to be used is not the way "I" would like it to be
- a representative of the WOC trustees and/or the AOS did something "I" didn't like.

Even when WOCs are held in countries that have formalized judging systems and these systems are followed, there is plenty of criticism (almost always by judges that are not subject to that system). When the WOC takes place in a country that doesn't have a standardized system (or the organizers decide to not follow it), the structure that is ultimately used gets torpedoed by the masses.

The trustees of the WOC Trust have spent an inordinate amount of time on the subject of judging. There is a comprehensive judging schedule that is available for any WOC to use in any manner they see fit. They can group, omit or subdivide classes. Or they can simply ignore the whole thing and do what they want. The schedule is a tool that is offered and not meant to be mandatory.

There is no suggestion as to what system is best because there isn't a best system. I'm sure that many AOS judges are sure the AOS system is the finest, but we can't even concur among ourselves as to how to do it. Some centers insist on "judging as a whole," while others never embrace that idea. Some judges insist on extensive research, while others are just as happy using the appreciation method. We can't even agree if 50 percent or more of the flowers of a phalaenopsis must be open as we cloak it with "should," not "have to."

Some shows in the United States require that every orchid be entered while others have some or none. We don't hear too many complaints at these shows, but no matter what the entry policy is at a WOC, gripes proliferate.

Most recent WOCs have required that judges be full registrants. The number of WOC registrants has been dwindling and it is financially necessary for organizers to have the income that judges provide with their

fees. It has become extraordinarily expensive to host a WOC and few have made money in the past 20 years. It is not a right to be able to judge at a WOC but a privilege.

The most angst seems to be over what was unfortunately called the “Rectification Committee” at the last WOC. Some judges felt this group of people was intent on making wholesale changes to what had happened earlier during the day. Since this WOC in Dijon, France, I have heard that calling the group the “Resolutions Committee” might sound less onerous, but when you consider that synonyms for rectification are “refinement” and “minor adjustment,” it seems ludicrous to worry about it.

If the organizers of a WOC want to use most (or all) of the medals that they have purchased for the event, that’s their business. Until all the regular judging has taken place, nobody can know the status. Imagine if the judges wanted to award more than had been purchased. Many judges disappear as soon as their team has finished its task and aren’t anywhere to be found if some change needs to be made after the fact. Several of the WOC organizers appoint the “whatever you want to call it” committee to award additional medals or possibly take some away if needed.

These committees are not trying to upset any exhibitor, overrule what has happened, or otherwise condemn the show judging. But no matter what they do, it is at the behest of the organizers and it’s entirely within their purview to do as they please.

I watched such a committee agonize over a cattleya at a WOC. The plant was a medal winner and was being considered for best in show. The question was whether the plant had been disbudded and/or the flowers had been flattened. The manipulation of orchid flowers has become an art and it’s difficult to detect in many instances. After much discussion, it was decided that the plant had been altered. Judges from the AOS would exclude the plant from any ribbons or medals but such may well not be the case in some other countries. We are adamant that plants not be altered and yet we say it’s okay to “help” an inflorescence by staking or maybe using some prop to ensure the blooms face where we want them. Where does one cross the line?

The last thing I want to do is upset someone so much that he or she decides not to attend the next (or any future) WOC because of this article. My only aim is to let everyone know that the best way to get a judging system they like is to be the host of a WOC and then they can employ their system. They shouldn’t count, though, on being praised because somebody, somewhere is going to be unhappy. What a shame.

WOCs should be fun. You should enjoy the show and social events as well as having the opportunity to hear excellent lectures. Go with the flow when it comes to judging. You don’t have to embrace it but you sure to have to use it. No matter how many things about it you don’t like, the folks who put it together and run it worked long and hard; and you aren’t going to win any friends by knocking it.

Peter R. Furniss is president of the World Orchid Conference Trust. 320 Hardy Road, Newnan, Georgia 30263 (e-mail sweetbayfarm@charter.net).