

Put that Ruler Away – for Now
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Have you ever noticed the first thing that happens to a plant when it is brought to the judging table is one or more of the judges immediately whips out a ruler or a tape measure and measures a flower? This invariably takes place before a serious evaluation of the flower's color or its form. What is it that makes the size of the flower so important? After all, in most genera, color accounts for a possible 30 points, as does flower form; size is only a maximum of 10 points. So why the rush to measure? Are we judges, evaluating the aesthetics of the flowers' form, color, presentation, and arrangement, or are we accountants or statisticians, interested mainly in quantitative characteristics?

In the 1950s, when most of the point scales for scoring flower quality awards were developed, size was very significant in the evaluation of new hybrids. Today this is no longer the case. We are past the point where it is necessary for a white phalaenopsis to measure 14, 15 or 16 centimeters horizontally to be considered for a quality award. Substance, lack of a prominent mid-rib, and arrangement on the inflorescence are all more important than size. In fact, one of the most significant directions in hybridizing in the past 10 years or so has been in multifloral or miniature phalaenopsis. In hybrids of this type, is larger better or worse?

At the Houston Judging Center, we have come up with a system which allows us to put the emphasis on judging where it belongs: on the 60 to 80 points available for form and color, not on the maximum 10 points available for flower size. All of our judges have agreed not to measure a flower until after it has been nominated for scoring. This process will help us become better judges, not bean counters. If statistics (size of previously awarded cultivars of the same grex, size of the parents, etc.) were the most important factors to consider in evaluating a flower for a quality award, then judges might not be necessary. We could simply measure the candidate for an award, put the numbers into a computer, and wait until the computer to spit out a score. That process is not judging. Evaluation of the form, color, presentation, flower count and substance is judging, and that is what we should be doing, with emphasis on color and form.

In fact, let us consider one further thought. Is flower size still worth 10 points? Is flower size as important as flower count, arrangement, and substance? Would our point scales more accurately reflect the most significant aspects of flower quality if the potential maximum score for size was reduced to six points, and the four points assigned to substance, or arrangement, or flower count? If you agree with the premise that size is currently over-valued, express your opinion to Paul Bechtel, chair of the AOS Judging Committee. For some genera, maybe it is time to re-evaluate our 40-plus-year-old score sheets.

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