

The Fatal Flaw

By Marvin Gerber and Jerry Stephens, MD

Published in Spring 1990 Awards Quarterly, Vol. 21, No. 1, page 30

At one time or another every judge has been on a team which has “screened out” or refused to score a plant because of one defect. A defect may or may not, in itself, be sufficient reason to prevent the plant from being awarded. Screening out is an abbreviated form of judging. This form of judging may be unfair to the exhibitor, especially when the flaw can be accounted for on the score sheet.

There are floral characteristics which are so undesirable and unacceptable as to prevent an award from being granted, or even preclude the scoring of a plant. These characteristics include excessive cupping, failure of the flower to open fully, color break, extreme plane variance and other failures of the grex. We are not referring to flowers unfortunate enough to bear these handicaps, but rather, to those flowers of high quality which seem to have one undesirable trait which can be marked down on the judges’ score sheets.

Some of these undesirable traits include lack of size, natural spread smaller than previously awarded cultivars or even smaller than either parent, notching on the dorsal side of the petals, not enough flowers, unbalanced dorsal sepal, markings with a low level of contrast, muddy or indistinct color, or a weak stem.

There is a great deal of variation as to how the scorable defects will be treated between different Judging Regions, or from one judging to the next, or even between two teams at the same judging to the next, or even between two teams at the same judging. To judge is to “form an opinion” or to “decide upon critically.” There are two methods of judging — in one method it is decided *not* to judge by screening out; in the other by scoring using the AOS point scale appropriate for the genus.

Which method should be used? In our opinion, screening out should be reserved for those flowers which are obviously unacceptable for the various faults indicated above or which, in the unanimous opinion of the judging team, fall short of the qualities needed for an award. Every judge has served on a team where only one team member wanted the plant scored (sometimes reluctantly) and the team was surprised that the plant scored in the award range *even after severely scoring down the “fatal flaw.”*

If it is decided to score plant with a deficiency which can be accounted for in the score sheet, how should the flaw be handled? If we are scoring a plant which shows notching on the petals do we lower the score on the petals only, or do we also lower the score on overall form? There does not seem to be a universally accepted answer. Each judge must decide individually how much the petal defect affects the overall flower, and then score it accordingly.

A similar situation occurs when a plant with fine form and color has only two or three flowers, yet the parentage would suggest that we should expect substantially more flowers. Many teams will arbitrarily screen out the plant, with the judges’ comments running along the line of “not enough flowers to judge this plant.” This is a flagrant example of fatal flaw mentality at work since the number of flowers counts for only ten

points maximum on most score sheets. The same applies to size, as is so clearly explained by Mary Noble McQuerry in *Awards Quarterly, Volume 11, No. 1*. The AOS judging system is designed to allow a prescribed number of points for each floral characteristic; this makes it relatively easy to give the proper weight to any deficiency. Our system is ideally suited to give the proper credit for form, color, stem or arrangement, floriferousness and substance; therefore, why should a weakness or failing in one of these areas disqualify a plant from further consideration? The way to note the deficiency is to score the flower in the problem area and allow the rest of the flower to “speak for itself.”

The AOS judging system has one safeguard which sometimes will allow the team to avoid the fatal flaw screening, and that is the requirement that a plant be scored if only one team member nominates it. In reality, however, a strong team captain can influence the rest of the team so that a less experienced or a probationary judge will be reluctant to nominate a plant which has been “talked down” because of a fatal flaw. The plant, therefore, is screened out for “not enough flowers” or “natural spread too small” or some other scorable problem.

There are no specific answers or solutions to this problem. We should continually ask ourselves if we are judging the flowers fairly — as we see them before us *right now* — not as we perceive in our minds how they *could be*. Failure to score a plant for a scorable fault, flaw or deficiency prevents our system from working and should be avoided.