

A.O.S. Flower Judging and Awards: Some Bothersome Issues

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The American Orchid Society judging system is one of the most valuable services the Society provides for its members. The main flower awards — the First Class Certificate (FCC), Award of Merit (AM), and Highly Commended Certificate (HCC) — are eagerly desired and followed by hobbyists and commercial growers alike because they are regarded as recognition of excellence. Considering the widespread interest in the awards, it is rather astonishing that the *Awards Quarterly* has not contained more discussion of the doctrine and practice of the A.O.S. judging system, particularly inasmuch as there are several quite bothersome and controversial issues that deserve attention and reflection. The first issue is whether “flower judging” really is being carried out — or even could be carried out — in accordance with the standard prescribed in the A.O.S. *Handbook on Judging and Exhibition*. In other words, how well does judging practice stack up against judging theory? If not well, is it the theory or the practice that should be changed? I believe almost everyone would agree that they should be in harmony.

The second class relates to the improvements in flower quality that have been occurring with some regularity in most genera for many decades. Does the judging system measure, record, and communicate the improvements adequately?

The third issue is to what extent do A.O.S. flower awards really indicate “superiority” of the awarded cultivars? What “caveats” need to be observed by those who take the awards into consideration in buying plants?

I will treat each of the issues separately — even though they are interrelated.

The Standard Established for Scoring Flower Quality

The seventh edition of the *Handbook on Judging and Exhibition* declares that it is “the official policy statement of AOS regarding the operation of its judging system. Observance of the rules stated herein is mandatory upon AOS judges.” Nothing could be much clearer than that! Judges are not given any latitude in selecting the standard they will employ. They have to accept the one specified in the *Handbook* — if they abide by the rules.

What is that standard? On the very first page of the *Handbook*, we are informed that in merit judging, orchid plants “are evaluated for their *intrinsic merit against hypothetical standards of perfection in the minds of each judge*” (italics mine). A scoring system is prescribed that establishes a score of 100 points for “hypothetical perfection.” The total score given by a judge is obtained by adding separate scores for form, color, size of flowers, their substance and texture, habit and arrangement of the inflorescence, and floriferousness. Each of these elements has a specified maximum number of points that can be given for “perfection” (for example, 30 points for color).

What does the term “perfection” mean? My dictionary defines perfection as “flawlessness; an unsurpassable degree of excellence.” Clearly, “perfection” is an *absolute* value, not a relative one. The Preamble to the Constitution of the United States notwithstanding, something cannot be “more perfect” than something else. It can only be “more nearly perfect.” If we have any imagination whatsoever — and any familiarity with the ongoing work of orchid hybridizers — we cannot consider “hypothetical perfection” to mean simply “the best we have yet seen.” It also must encompass the best

we can reasonably imagine and hope to see sometime. This is an important distinction because it has a direct bearing on the frequency with which judges will feel compelled to raise their standards of “hypothetical perfection.”

Please note, also, that the time horizon of each judge become critical once “perfection” has to encompass *future* progress. For example, as judges are we supposed to score “novelty-type” phalaenopsis by the quality level we can reasonably expect them to attain a couple of years from now or six or eight years from now? The Handbook gives no guidance on how far ahead our horizon should be and how optimistic we should be in setting the “ideal” to which the *Handbook* refers.

Quite obviously, no judge’s notion of “perfection” — of what would be “ideal” — will remain fixed forever for each and every genus. One would expect, however, that cause for change would mark a rare and quite special occasion.

There are a number of implications that follow from the choice of the standard of “hypothetical perfection in the minds of each judge.” For one, everyday observation demonstrates that some judges have much livelier or more critical imaginations than others, so one judge’s “ideal” is likely, on many occasions, to differ from another’s, perhaps quite materially. What criteria should be adduced to decide what is reasonable? Averaging of the scores of the judges gives a number but not an answer to the question. To some extent, this problem would arise no matter what standard was adopted, but the standard of hypothetical perfection exacerbates what would be a problem in any circumstance — for reasons I will turn to later.

That is only part of my concern, however. Another part is the implicit assumption of prescience. As one distinguished British judge expressed it, he finds it worrisome that “the A.O.S. seemed to know in advance what the perfect *Cattleya* would look like before we got there.”

Can the “perfect *Odontioda*” be described in detail in advance of ever having been seen? Can the perfect *Phalaenopsis violacea*? Or any other species or hybrid for that matter? Besides, if the A.O.S. Committee on Awards were to draft a detailed description of, say, a perfect white *Phalaenopsis*, and I were to present for judging a plant that fully met those specifications, would any panel of judges give it a score of 100 points? I very much doubt it! To my knowledge and without having scanned every award that has ever been granted, no plant has ever received an FCC with a score of 100 points. Has there never been a “perfect” species or hybrid in *any* genus? Or is the answer that hypothetical perfection really is not the norm that judges use?

Even if judges were to try to apply the prescribed standard of conceivable perfection, how could they then proceed to score a plant that quite obviously fell somewhat short of perfection? The *Handbook* gives absolutely no guidelines — nor any other reference points — for converting shortfalls from a judge’s “ideal” into the number of points he or she should deduct from the maximum allowable for hypothetical perfection.

For example, suppose I am judging a plant with flowers of very good color, both overall and in each of their parts. And let us assume I can *imagine* coloration that would be a tiny bit deeper or brighter or more evenly distributed. I hope someday to see a flower with color that fully satisfies my dream even though I have not seen one yet in that genus, and none of the other judges claims to have done so. What should I do? Color represents a possible 30 points or 30% of the total score for all genera except paphiopedilums, for which it has a 40% weight. How many points should I deduct in my scoring? One point?

Two? Five? Where are the criteria or guidelines? The *Handbook* gives none — not even any suggestions. The only standard provided to us is “hypothetical perfection” in terms of whatever that may mean to each judge individually.

It should be noted, from the example I have just given, that the scoring under the A.O.S. system always has to be a process of *deducting* points. We start with a standard of perfection, which is 100 points, and then must *scale down* if we really apply the mandated standard. We cannot do otherwise. If we were to start with an image of what we would consider to be a composite of an “average” plant in the genus, use it as our reference base, and assign it a value of, say, 50 points (i.e., midway between zero and 100), we could then “score up” by deciding how many points above 50 we should give to the plant before us on the judging table because it is noticeably superior to the “average” in color, form, etc. We would give it a number of points which we thought properly positioned it between the “typical” and the points awarded recently to other cultivars we regard as being superior to this plant. Of, if the plant before us seems superior to some recent AMs of the same grex, we might wish to take the score given to one or more of those AM plants and “score up” from that base (or down, if need be, with respect to some of the plant’s characteristics).

From my observation, this comparative approach, which involves positioning plants between those which have received lower scores and those which have received higher scores, is what A.O.S. judges normally do. And even this is done in a flexible manner which is influenced by the judges’ opinion of the appropriateness of some of the earlier award scores. This, incidentally, is the general approach followed by the judges of the Orchid Committee of the Royal Horticultural Society, although they do not do any numerical scoring.

In other words, nearly all A.O.S. judges, I believe, consciously or unconsciously, start with some reference base or bases derived from their usually extensive experience, something they have seen, and then “score up” or “score down” from it. That is an eminently sensible approach. For one thing, it enables judges, before the scoring begins, to discuss a plant’s strengths and weaknesses in a language common to all of them, namely, in terms of plants already known to them. They can refresh their memories and reduce their differences by referring to photographs and earlier award descriptions. This process gives them a feeling for the “right” score within a fairly narrow range. Could they do this if they tried to compare a plant with their individual “ideal” plant and then had to “score down?” Yet, whenever judges adopt the very reasonable approach I have just described, they are violating the formal and inflexible standard imposed by the *Handbook*. Nevertheless, they do it regularly — as I am sure nearly all of them would admit in their more candid moments.

Let me prove my assertion that A.O.S. judging, in practice, largely ignores the standard of “hypothetical perfection” prescribed by the *Handbook*.

If the *Handbook* standard had been followed, we would have witnessed a strong upward trend in the top scores given to awarded plants in genera in which we know that substantial improvements have been evident. Whatever “perfection” may mean, the progress that has been made should have brought us closer to it.

We know, for example, that the best of today’s cattleyas, vandas, paphiopedilums, and phalaenopsis are considerably better than those of 20 or 30 years ago, for the most part, yet they are not being given higher scores. To cite a few figures, from 1951 through

1985, there were 18 FCCs given to cattleyas. Sixteen of these were in the range of 90-92 points. Over the same period, there were 21 FCCs awarded to vandas. Sixteen of these, too, fell in the range of 90-92 points. For both cattleyas and vandas, the highest single point scores were given in the 1951-1960 decade. The point scores certainly seem to be telling us that we are not getting any closer to perfection.

If we agree that today's "best of breed" are better than yesterday's and that the top scores have not risen, we cannot escape the conclusion that hypothetical perfection is no standard at all because it is a nearly constant increment above the stable median number of points that have been given to FCCs ever since point scoring began in 1949.

I have heard one judge respond that the reason why there has been no upward trend in the top point scores is because, "We do raise our definition of perfection as better plants appear." Because some others may make the same argument, let's look at the claim and examine its implications.

Higher quality plants would not call for elevating the level of hypothetical perfection if the improvements were within the realm of previously reasonable expectation. However, they would produce higher average top scores, which has not occurred. Ordinarily, one would think, judges would feel compelled to raise their notions of absolute perfection *only* whenever plants appear that are evidently better than the best we previously thought were *possible* in our imaginings of what our "ideal" would look like. To imply that that happens regularly and accompanies the appearance of most improvements in quality (which is what would be required in order to explain the absence of periodic upward trends in award scores) strains one's credulity. It also would denigrate unfairly the experience, foresight, and imagination of most A.O.S. judges.

A much more credible position, as I have already suggested but need to repeat, is that judges continuously become more critical simply because the average level of quality that has been passing before them at judgings, shows, and visits to orchid growers has moved upward. The competition has become tougher to beat. Their standard is not some abstract notion of hypothetical perfection but, instead, the strength of the current competition!

The distinction between these two standards may seem subtle, but it is central to understanding how the judging system really works in practice, not in theory. It is the difference between using as one's reference plants that really exist and have been seen versus a reference point that uses plants existing only in someone's imagination. In the first case, meaningful discussions can occur among the judges. In the second case, meaningful discussion becomes very difficult and resolution of differences impossible. Who can say that my imagined "ideal" is unrealistic and yours is more appropriate if we both are experienced judges and knowledgeable about the genus? Surely, one of the most important criteria a good judging standard should be expected to meet is that it should facilitate rather than hinder the resolution of differences of opinion among the judges.

There is another bothersome problem that arises out of scoring against a fixed standard of hypothetical perfection: repetitious awards to cultivars of outstanding grexes, such as *Ascocenda* Yip SumWah. This situation has given rise to a great deal of discussion in judging circles. What seems to have been overlooked, however, is that so long as the current absolute standard of perfections is officially mandated, no cultivar that is fully as good as previously awarded cultivars of the same grex can legitimately be denied an equivalent award itself. If it is fully as good, it must, by definition, be the same distance from perfection, and therefore deserves to be given the same number of points as its

predecessors of like quality. One can counter that the definition of perfection has been elevated *only* if the very best of the new cultivars is demonstrably better than what was envisaged by the previous standard of perfection. For that to be so, one would first expect to see some scores in the 95-100 end of the range. This has not happened.

Under an alternative conceptual approach to judging, which I call the “comparative approach,” plants would be evaluated to assess their appropriate position or placement within the current population in which they belong rather than against some imagined “ideal” standard. Using the “comparative” yardstick, the problem of repetitious awards would be diminished because the median level of quality would rise as more good cultivars appeared on the scene. It would become successively harder, therefore, for plants of the same quality as heretofore to make it into the FCC, AM, and HCC brackets. This is as it should be because the A.O.S. judging system should be concerned, above all else, with recognition of *improvement* of quality, rather than *duplication* of already achieved levels of quality.

Recording Improvements in Quality

The *Handbook*, in its very first paragraph, stresses the centrality of the quest for improvement. It declares that “The American Orchid Society’s system of judging has been developed to grant recognition to new and superior forms of orchid species and to improved forms of orchid hybrids.” Both the conceptual standard established for evaluating an orchid and the mode of applying the standard should facilitate this purpose, but that is not the case under the current official doctrine and rules. Under the system officially prescribed, persistent improvements in quality, as I have noted, soon would produce a bunching of scores at the top end of the range, and soon there would be no room for recognizing future advances in quality by higher scores. Unfortunately, the problem also would exist with any system of “judging against the competition” which used point scoring, but at least under such a system it would be apparent that the nature of the system made interperiod comparisons of award scores largely meaningless.

So far as I can see, adequate awards descriptions are the only way we can remedy this problem. We cannot do it by any system of numerical scores. The descriptions, more than the scores, should be the centerpiece of any A.O.S. judging system. All too often, the current awards descriptions published in the A.O.S. Awards Quarterly provide little useful information for those who seek to know why one cultivar was deemed to be better than a plant they own or are interested in acquiring, apart from the measurements and, in some instances, a photo, which has its own limitations. Readers are invited to read a representative sample of the descriptions in any issue of the *Awards Quarterly* and decide for themselves whether my criticism is too harsh or not harsh enough. How many descriptions do you find that give us any clear and specific notion of why the awarded plant was considered much superior to the average, and, more importantly, to earlier awarded plants of the same type?

In this connection, one is entitled to wonder why much more of the most useful information obtained from point scoring is not put to use. As I already have mentioned, judges are required to score the following qualities of an orchid being considered for an FCC, AM, or HCC award: form, color, size, substance and texture, habit and arrangement of the inflorescence, and floriferousness, but the public is not told the breakdown of the average total scores into the scores for the individual components. That would be very useful information for making comparisons of awarded cultivars. In fact, without it,

meaningful comparisons simply cannot be made. Yet the average score for each element is not even recorded on the summary sheets that each judging center sends to the A.O.S. If the component scores are significant — and I think they are — they should be recorded and shared. If they are not of value, judges should not be required to put them on the score sheets. It should be optional.

In this connection, it also is puzzling that the *Handbook* states that “a judge with many years of experience who is very familiar with the genus being considered need not show a detailed breakdown of the score.” One would think that, in furtherance of uniform standards and for the education of less experienced judges, it would be detailed breakdowns by the most experienced judges that would be most valuable and needed — if detailed scoring really is regarded as an essential part of the judging process.

What Does a Flower Award Really Connote?

A third major issue is the exaggerated importance many (perhaps even most) A.O.S. members seem to give the FCC, AM, and HCC awards. While it may be asking a great deal of the A.O.S. to urge it to downplay, at least a little bit, the importance of its flower awards, I believe the *A.O.S. Bulletin* would be doing a service to its subscribers if it published some caveats once in a while. Basically, flower scoring is a kind of beauty contest, in practice if not in theory. In all probability, it will never be much more. Why not admit it?

There are a number of qualities that contribute significantly to overall “superiority” of any orchid that are not taken into consideration in judging for A.O.S. flower awards. Consistency of flower quality and of number of flowers from one blooming to another are two such considerations. Lasting quality of the flowers is important, too. Substance is a proxy here — but not always a good one. Yet, the judging system does not — and quite probably cannot — take these three qualities into account. As the *Handbook* succinctly states, “An entry must be judged as it is when a judge sees it, not what it was the day before or what it may be tomorrow.” Fair enough — and very sensible from the standpoint of operating a manageable judging system. But at the same time, we should recognize that this requirement forces us to render a rather limited evaluation of the “intrinsic merits” of the plants we are judging.

Predictability and frequency of blooming are two further qualities highly relevant to superiority. I have a *Vanda* (or did have until I threw it out recently) that earned an AM many years ago. Whenever it bloomed, it was great. The trouble is that it rarely bloomed. That is a fatal defect for any grower who has room for only a modest number of plants, and it is probably an intrinsic defect for that particular cultivar. But it would not count as a fault under the A.O.S. system of scoring.

Ease of cultivation, attractiveness of the foliage, and plant growth habit are all qualities (albeit not “flower qualities”) we should consider in buying and keeping plants. But, like the other qualities I have mentioned, they are “designed out” of the judging system. This is not a criticism, just a fact to bear in mind. There are good reasons why the judging system cannot encompass most of the excluded qualities but, at the same time, the exclusions do weaken the meaningfulness of the A.O.S. flower awards.

There is, in my opinion, another problem created by the rather exaggerated importance many orchid hobbyists give to the flower awards. This is that the situation tends to create a bias — unintended to be sure — in favor of mericlones of awarded cultivars at the expense of new hybrids, especially when hybridizers are aiming to improve on earlier

grexes in directions that are not recognized adequately (if at all) by the judging system, such as frequency of blooming or plant growth habit. I regard this as unfortunate, even though it really is not the fault of the system. The fault lies in the prevalence of misunderstanding of the scope of A.O.S. flower awards.

Conclusion

Considering all the human and other limitations under which it operates, the A.O.S. judging system, with one notable exception, functions astonishingly well in actual practice. The one major exception is the awards descriptions, which generally fail to give much of a clue as to why the judges considered a plant to be appreciably superior to others in its class. With sufficient determination, the Committee on Awards could effect a reform in this area. The system works as well as it does in other respects largely because the judges have developed sensible, pragmatic standards for evaluating plants and pay little attention to the highly abstract and impracticable standard of “hypothetical perfection” mandated in the *Handbook*.

In the last analysis, the quality and performance of any judging system, the esteem in which it is held, and the perceived value of its awards will depend much more on the reputation of the judges for competence and integrity than on the formalities and established norms of the system. In this respect, the A.O.S. is most fortunate. It sets and enforces high standards for its judges. Judges take pride in their efforts to keep current, to be fair, and to make the system work harmoniously. Nevertheless, the formalities and established norms of the system should be designed to help them achieve their goals. They should not, because of rigidities and inconsistencies, be an obstacle that must be circumvented. Some “tidying up” of the official policy statement and rules is badly needed to bring the content of the *Handbook* into accord with the way the system really works.

Finally, to return again to a need that cannot be overemphasized, we need a clearer and more detailed record of the nature of the improvements that prompted each A.O.S. flower award — a record that will permit adequate comparisons among awarded plants. After all is said and done, the presence of such a record is what makes the system potentially valuable to A.O.S. members. Without such a record, A.O.S. awards will have little more significance than trophies, becoming like the ribbons awarded at flower shows — nice to have but contributing little to the future.