

Vanda Coerulea Awards - A Response

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Published in Awards Quarterly Volume 24, Number 3, 1993, page 260

In his article in the Awards Quarterly, Volume 24, Number 1, on "The Philosophy of Judging," Dr. A. G. Tharp, inter alia, raises three issues about awards to *Vanda coerulea* "in recent years." The issues he raises relate to the authenticity of some of the plants awarded, the quality of the awarded clones and the capability of AOS judges to evaluate the species because of lack of exposure to sufficient plants.

To quote the specific allegations: "...several of the plants awarded are not even *Vanda coerulea*"; American Orchid Society judges have granted awards to plants of this species that are so ordinary they would be sold for a few baht in Thailand." (a baht is worth 4 U.S. cents); "...a few have been FCCs"; Thai judges "... have seen thousands" of this species and "...how many FCCs have the Thais given...?"

If his assertions are valid, then Dr. Tharp's conclusion that something has obviously failed in the AOS judging system should be cause for serious concern. On the other hand, if his allegations are unfounded, then so is his conclusion.

In my opinion, Dr. Tharp's allegations are without much merit and need to be corrected. They are unfair to the judges and to the owners of the awarded plants; those plants henceforth will be under a cloud of questioned provenance unless the charge can be and is refuted.

What are the facts? First, to correct misstatements about "a few" and "several" plant, only two FCCs have been given to *Vanda coerulea* since 19890, not "a few," which suggests a larger number (as does the word "several" in the quotation above).

Since 1980, which should be far enough back to bound the term "recent," eight awards (other than CCMs) have been granted to clones of *V. coerulea*. I have received six of these eight awards, including one FCC. Are these six plants genuine?

A rare pink form of the species, recipient of a CHM, was authenticated by the Orchid Identification Center at Selby Gardens. The other five awarded clones (one FCC, three AMs and one HCC) are siblings from a cross called RX-12 by the breeder, Dr. Somsadki, a Thai physician. I purchased a dozen of the seedlings from him and other breeders of *V. coerulea*. Are the RX-12 plants pure *Vanda coerulea*?

Dr. Robert Griesbach performed DNA analysis on two of the five siblings and compared them with an analysis of a jungle-collected plant he had obtained from an official source in Thailand. His objective was not primarily to verify my plants but rather to determine whether the outstanding *V. coerulea* widely being used for breeding *Vanda* hybrids in Thailand (where most *Vanda* breeding is done) is authentic. They are so much improved that questions about their genetic purity had been raised occasionally. Since my RX-12 plants are a cross of *V. coerulea* 'Robor #2' and *V. coerulea* 'PAO #10', two widely used stud plants, they qualified as being representative. Dr. Griesbach found the tested plants to be genuine.

Of the two remaining awarded plants, one received a FCC in Florida in 1986. Because it was not verified at the time of the award, there is, indeed, reason to challenge the authenticity of that plant. Recently the owner of a division of this plant sought to resolve some skepticism he encountered regard the plant's authenticity. Dr. Eric Christenson, the leading taxonomic authority on Sarcanthinae, examined the plant and rendered his opinion in writing that because of a number of specific morphological characteristics that he outlined in detail, the plant could not be certified as *Vanda coerulea*. Given the described situation, it could properly be said that the judging system apparently did fail in this instance. It seems reasonable that judges should insist more frequently on verification of awards granted to species, especially where there are many hybrids that rather closely resemble the species; that certainly is the case with many tessellated blue vandas. But one instance does not warrant a sweeping condemnation.

What about the remaining awarded plant? I know of no reason to challenge the authenticity of that plant. If someone else questions it, that person, in fairness to the owner and to potential purchasers of divisions and/or offspring, should give some specifics.

If the awarded *V. coerulea* plants are so ordinary that ones of equal quality can be bought in Thailand for a few baht (cents) each, why haven't better ones been brought to this country and exhibited? A number of American importers, judges and other growers of vandas frequently tour Thai nurseries, and attend, and occasionally judge, orchid shows in Thailand. Plants are offered for sale there, and the fact is that good *V. coerulea* plants sell for several hundred dollars in Thailand.

Finally, there is the broader issue of whether AOS judges are so much less knowledgeable about *Vanda coerulea* (and presumably *Vanda* hybrids) than are the Thai judges, and whether the latter are much more strict than we are. While the proposition advanced by Dr. Tharp has a plausible ring, I believe it is wrong.

While researching Thai awards to vandas a few years ago, I learned that on one occasion, a grower submitted 19 *V. coerulea* plants for judging. Eighteen were given an AM and one an HCC. What is the likelihood that could happen here? Over the past 20 years I have attended a number of Thai orchid shows. I chaired a team that judged vandas and asocendas at the 1992 Asia-Pacific Orchid Conference in Chiang Mai. The plants awarded in this country do not suffer by comparison, for the most part.

Would Dr. Tharp extend his proposition to *Phalaenopsis equestris*, for example, or to *Odontoglossum* species, and say that only Filipinos or Colombians, respectively, can adequately judge them?

The facts are: 1) There are American judges who travel abroad and judge at foreign shows. They see the best of what is available. They share their experiences at judging and training sessions at home. 2) We have a more rigorous system of training. This is quite apparent to those us who have judged abroad. 3) While it certainly helps to see "thousands" of plants, that does not always prove one a good judge of quality. This is evident when we view the performance of some beginning student judges in this country. Rigorous training is required to master the skills necessary to apply the standards set by the AOS; that is why there are no exemptions for commercial growers who enter the judging program.