

Three Little Words

By Ernest Hethington

It has been my good fortune to be an American Orchid Society judge and participative in the development of the judging system since 1950. It is now the world's largest judging system and model for other judging systems throughout the world. I remember well in the late 1940s and early 1950s the question: "On what concept do we establish a judging system and whose do we use as a model?" The decision was "Type and breeding from the Royal Horticultural Society's system in England." It was wise, for such a concept permits an open perspective and recognition that a system must be ever in change. New worlds are continually being presented to us.

When a person is introduced into the American Orchid Society's judging system, they are told, or they grasp the realization, that the orchid world is vast: literally more than anyone can learn or know. Still, and I subscribe to the dictum, they must be knowledgeable. A judge must be ever learning, and here is the problem. The orchid world is expanding in technology, hybridizing, taxonomy and other areas. In our system there are many very good judges, still, with even the best, they must admit they are most knowledgeable in certain areas. Literally no person can know everything about judging orchids. This is the point of my commentary: I respect a person for saying the three little words — "I don't know."

It has been my experience that when saying "I don't know," another judge who does know will give much appreciated and valuable information on the plant or line of breeding. When a judge has summed up everything they know or can learn about the plant they are judging, then, and only then, can they come to the moment of truth when they put down a score.

I do not advocate having our judges certified as experts, though there is merit in this. It would be of value if more chairs assumed the responsibility to see that experienced judges were at tables where they could provide information and guide new judges. Too often this is lacking. In all fields of human endeavor, there are specialists or experts; in medicine, chemistry, law, botany and beyond. But why go out of orchids? In orchids we have worlds to explore.

As judges we must be serious about our judging, but we must not take ourselves too seriously. We are not anointed when we become a judge. It is an honor, but it should be a sober honor. To attend judgings and judge at shows is to add to our education, which should never end. Perhaps, as a final thought, the most mature thing we can say is, "I don't know."

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