

Experience and Judgment

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Published in Awards Quarterly, Volume 14, Number 3, 1983, pages 132-133

The American Orchid Society's Handbook on Judging and Exhibition is a marvelous aid to judges. It is also invaluable to persons outside the judging system who wish to know more about evaluating orchids. Regrettably, members of the American Orchid Society do not realize the value of our Handbook. I urge that future editions contain color with a different format and added content for wider appeal to the general orchid public. These comments are preamble to my present theme, the importance of experience and judgment. Neither qualities appear concretely in the Handbook for they are those intangible characteristics which denote a good judge.

The American Orchid Society's basic instruction to judges is to grant maximum latitude, assuming the judges are knowledgeable and capable of exercising good judgment. With this premise, judges are given the responsibility of granting awards to superior forms of existing hybrids, to superior, new and desirably different lines of breeding and to superior forms of species. Reduced to simplest terms, this is all the instruction an American Orchid Society judge ever needs. However, years of training are required to reach this point.

There are several judging systems throughout the world which, while formulated and improved by conscientious individuals over the years, are still too restrictive in their concept and regulations. The key to any judging system, whether it be for Lower Patagonia or Upper Greenland, is the knowledge that plants and plant forms are constantly changing. Hybridizers are creating so many new and desirably different forms that no rigid rules can ever adequately permit the judges to use their experience and judgment to their fullest extent. The AOS concept of judging, patterned in part after the Royal Horticultural Society's judging system, does allow this latitude.

I once wrote an article for an orchid magazine titled "The Wonderful Judging Machine." This was a satire on a system that was so highly formalized that the judges merely had to put the plant in bloom into a chamber via a moving belt. The plant would emerge from the chamber with a score printed on a grocery-like slip of paper, having been subjected to sensors and counters. Everything had been arbitrarily predetermined by "the committee" as far as assigned values were concerned. Unfortunately, after testing the machine at a number of judgments, the Awards Committee could not figure out how to incorporate experience and judgment with ever-changing plant qualities introduced by the

hybridizers. The machine was put into storage by the Awards Committee where it now remains.

On the matter of experience, no judge can tell how "good" an orchid is if he has not seen others of the cross or type. A good Chairman of judging should see that his judging teams are properly organized, having experienced accredited judges in proper balance with student and probationary judges. If an individual knows little or nothing about a particular plant or line of breeding, good judgment will direct him to someone in the judging room who does know. I do not mean to imply that this particular judge should not score the plant about which he has questions, but he certainly should gather sufficient information upon which to sharpen his final judgment.

A wide experience of hybrids and species is a mark of any good judge. Comparison of the plant being judged with all those which he has seen in the past is crucial to judge properly. The same situation holds true for species. I have been interested in superior forms of *Cattleya* for many years. I know how rare some forms of certain species are. Some are one of a kind and shall perhaps never be equaled. Others may be equally beautiful and, like *Cattleya intermedia alba*, have been in cultivation for many years. When the green with white-lip *Cattleya leopoldii alba* (*guttata alba*) was introduced by B. O. Bracey in the 1960's, surely it should have received an FCC/AOS. Another like it, to my knowledge, has not yet appeared. True, there are now many selfed seedlings so its original fame has passed, but should good judgment have recognized it then?

All American Orchid Society judges should have the experience of growing good, healthy orchid plants so that they will recognize the effects of good and bad culture. Every AOS judge should have the personal satisfaction of making an orchid cross and seeing it through to flowering. Judges should also have the actual experience of being on both sides of the judging table, as an exhibitor for a possible AOS award as well as a grantor of those awards. Much perspective will be gained by placing your judgment "on the line" with your peers.

The famous hybridizer Joseph Urmston used to say "an average variety, well-grown, will give you better flowers than a superior variety poorly grown." Some readers of the Awards Quarterly may retort "we must judge them as we see them." True! The fact remains, however, that awards are often given which are more the result of cultural conditions than true flower quality. How many plants which any AOS judge has seen scored and awarded are ever flowered up to award-quality again or achieve any further measure of fame and recognition? Precious few. Someday I hope the American Orchid Society will have an "All-American" award, granted throughout the system to any particular cultivar which consistently displays multiple superior qualities such as strong growth tendencies, reliability of flowering, etc. But that is another story.

On the matter of judgment, some people inherently possess good judgment; some do not. Some can be trained to acquire the ability. Others, never. The American Orchid Society provides many published guidelines for the study of and actual judging of orchids. These are very helpful, especially for the beginner with an aptitude for judgment. The problem lies in combining the mechanical (rules, regulations) with the less tangible (experience, taste, prejudices etc.). It is unfair to say that judges must have no personal likes or dislikes as far as orchids are concerned when they are judging. These likes and dislikes, these "prejudices," are part and parcel of our perceptions and are inevitably brought to bear in any judgment. The point however is to understand our prejudices such that we use them appropriately. In my case, I am fond of phalaenopsis. Quite frankly, while excellent progress has been made in their improvement over the years, enormous work still needs to be done in defining more sharply the horticultural groups within the Phalaenopsis hybrid complex and in creating new types. Therefore my prejudice is that I do not believe that every phalaenopsis that has five more spots on each petal than some of its siblings or that has petals one millimeter wide than another that may have received an award should therefore be granted an award. As a commercial grower, I have often been asked which orchids were my favorites. My reply always is "I cannot say, for if I start showing favorites, those which are not favorites will receive less attention." If you are presented with a particular plant at the judging table, about which you know little or about which you have very strong opinions, be doubly certain that you are with judges who may differ from you. Listen to them so that you may clarify your own position more clearly, using your prejudices, not being directed by them.

I am an exponent of that philosophy of judging which prefers to see, first, what is good about a plant presented for judging. I try to see how it might be an improvement within that particular hybrid, or, if it represents a new line of breeding, whether it is a desirably different achievement. If the plant is a species, I honestly ask the question "how does it compare to others of its species or type?" A good judge, in my opinion, is not an individual who attempts to find the most faults in a flower. True, we must try to be as objective as possible in our judgment and thus we must be aware of particular faults in any given flower. However, let us not search for the little flaws and overlook a multitude of charm and beauty.

Our judgments of orchids must stand the test of time. We are not weighing potatoes or searching for imperfections in a manufactured article. We are making personal, often lonely aesthetic judgments. We must be confident as we grant an award that others, seeing divisions of that plant flowering elsewhere, will understand why that plant got that award. This confidence is built upon experience and judgment.

When the American Orchid Society's system of judging was established in the 1940s and early 1950s, orchid growing and hybridizing efforts were far less extensive than they

are today. In those early years, a judge could readily acquire broad knowledge of the overall picture. Now, with so many lines of hybridizing so vastly expanded, we must work very hard to maintain the broadest possible overview of judging. The beauty of our system is that it is continually changing and being adapted as orchids themselves change. This is the reason that the AOS system continues to grow and to serve as a model for other judging systems throughout the world. We can all hope that in time orchid judging systems elsewhere will all share the same concepts, and an orchid judge will be able then to go anywhere and confidently understand the system of that area.