

Aspects of Orchid Exhibit Design

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There is unanimity of opinion that, after you have won your first blue ribbon and managed 80 points for an Award of Merit, few moments of orchid bliss matches those that occur when the A.O.S. Show Trophy is placed in your hands. Conversely, nothing matches the agony arising when your prize presentation of a flawless exhibit is unrecognized by the judges. "Where did *they* go wrong?" you question. Since we are now at a low time of the year for orchid shows, perhaps a little advance planning and reading will make for a better result next year as you improve your understanding of where *you* went wrong.

A current analysis of exhibit entries attests to the increase in the number of exhibitors at orchid shows. This more or less parallels the increase in the number of small commercial growers and advertisers listed in the A.O.S. *Bulletin*. For the beginner or amateur grower, this situation has sometimes created the feeling of an unequal competition and has resulted in their participation only as a member of a Society exhibit. While certainly great, the joy of winning as a participant in a collaborative effort isn't quite the same as that from being a soloist. Although the suggestions I offer here are applicable to all who enter an exhibit in a show, they are particularly appropriate to the smaller grower.

Bigger is not necessarily better! The minimum size requirement for the A.O.S. Show Trophy is a twenty-five square-foot exhibit. Even though larger areas can contain a greater variety, the smaller exhibit can have adequate variety, scoring heavily if each plant is groomed and shown to perfection. Quantities of crowded, poorly presented plants, improperly grown, with inflorescences past their peak, have lost more points for exhibitors than any advantage which size of exhibit might have gained. The exhibit illustrated in FIGURE 1, with only ten plants in perfect balance with its theme, presents flowers which focus on a point of interest at the same time presenting themselves for critical judgment.

A winning exhibit has the same qualities as a prized painting. Good design is always a combination of qualities which, though there may be a dominant element, exist in harmony. The center of interest in any picture is not necessarily the center of the frame but may be placed where it seems harmonious to the image as a whole. This means that the center will be visually supported. Lines may run to and from the center of interest; other forms will give it visual support. Harmony is a visual balance pleasing to the eye. Objects or pathways in the dead center of an exhibit often create a static presentation. Nevertheless, such offerings still appear in show after show and are represented by FIGURES 2 and 3. These exhibits appeared at a large domestic show and at an international presentation. Some exhibitors go to extreme lengths, a la Alfred Hitchcock's brief appearance in each of his films, to tie in a corporate identification in their exhibit. While this may result in some extra publicity when the identification signs are reinstalled at the conclusion of judging, it only too often interferes with the show theme harmony

and detracts from the aesthetic value of the exhibit. FIGURE 4 illustrates this dubious design quality.

Every major community has what can be called design centers. If you will risk exposure to all of them, you will assuredly improve the style of your work. Don't be afraid to attempt new concepts. For an individual living in metropolitan New York this would mean studying the sense of design of the best painters and photographers shown at the Museum of Modern Art, the Guggenheim Museum, the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art and The International Center for Photography. All of them have a story to tell of images with a dominant center of interest. All the stories told are captured from a different perspective leaving the viewer with an understanding of what the artist who, like you the exhibitor, is saying. What, then, will you say with your orchid exhibit?

Most show themes have ample latitude for expression, and the ingenuity of the creator of the exhibit can be, and often is, the deciding factor in winning an award. Look closely at the Point Scale for A.O.S. awards, Sec. 6.3.3:*Show Trophy*:

General arrangement	35
Quality of flowers	35
Variety	20
Labeling	<u>10</u>
<i>Total points</i>	100

Even though few orchids found in the wild resemble their depiction in orchid exhibits, naturalized settings, with or without plastic waterfalls, are always common in orchid shows. If this be your preference, camouflage the pots. This can be effected by covering them with appropriately colored cloth or felt, sinking them out of sight or covering them with your flooring material. Remember: even one raw pot can ruin the effect you have spent hours creating. If you envision your waterfall as a major force of presentation, turn it off and see if the dynamics are still there when the water ceases flowing. Most pumps are too small to do what is asked of them and the failure of even a 5 hp. Pump in one major show can be a disaster.

You now have months before your next show. Make a simple design layout, or, if that is not your cup of tea, ask a friend to do it for you. (You will be surprised how far a small orchid arrangement goes toward getting someone to give you help on the basic model.) Few auditoriums have adequate individual lighting. When it is available, it tends to blast the entire display, allowing no effective highlights. Remember the magnificent Rembrandt you saw at the museum? It was the artist's use of *chiaroscuro* or highlights that gave it depth and color differentiation. Use your Christmas flood light holder, borrow some spots from the local playhouse or, as a last resort, enlist a friend who has electronic knowledge. Again we can go to a museum for the challenge of how to use lighting. The Loretta Hines Howard Christmas tree at the Metropolitan Museum of Art is world famous in part because of its flawless use of light. The one hundred and forty Neapolitan crèche figures in this towering tree are individually suffused with light from sources

entirely hidden in the boughs. In a darkened hall the effect has been mesmerizing to the millions of viewers who have seen it over the last eighteen Christmas seasons. By contrast, very few orchid exhibits do as much as they should with light. A very different and dramatic effect was achieved in the exhibit in FIGURE 1 through the use of fiber optics.

While the last page of the *Handbook on Judging and Exhibition* gives a number of suggestions to exhibitors on staging, the instructions are reticent on the aesthetics of labeling. I have long advocated the numerical identification system, one, because it is both unobtrusive to the total picture created, and two, because it permits quick identification in displays that have great depth or height in their setting. FIGURE 5 illustrated the damage a label can do when it is used inappropriately to identify miniature orchids. *In-situ* labeling can be effective only when it blends into the setting. A recent award winner went to the effort of polishing the inside of various lengths of curled bark and used that surface for the necessary identification of orchids exhibited on a naturalized beach setting. This superb effort involved countless hours of hard work and available labor. The close proximity of the viewer made for easy reading.

Pressure-sensitive numbers are easy to apply and can be done at the last moment in a variety of attractive ways. For a test, set up a few pots with labels and then replace the labels with numerals. Take a Polaroid shot of each “exhibit” — and compare. The labels, when placed adjacent to the pot or stuck in them at variable angles, will appear as distracting blobs ruining the fluidity of both linear and color flow. The numerically identified plants will present no interference. Try stepping back from your exhibit and taking a Polaroid shot whenever you reach a critical point. You will be amazed at how the actual picture may differ from that in your mind. Criticizing your own exhibit at various stages of its creation allows you time to make necessary change — before the judges and the public appear!

The ten points allotted for labeling are beginning to carry more significance and, for the individual amateur exhibitor, will prove an important item. Your exhibit is created for enjoyable viewing by both the public and the judges. It was therefore with more than a casual chuckle that I noted at a recent show some fifty-one of the fifty-four judges in attendance wearing glasses — leaving only three to explain away their vanity. Significantly, the *A.O.S. Handbook on Judging and Exhibition* suggestions begin and end with “Read the schedule.” Every Show Chairman has a list of “You wouldn’t believe” stories to tell. You needn’t compound this list! A clear understanding of the rules and regulations of each show, the latitude allowed in working with the show theme, the use of non-orchid materials, etc., will eliminate unnecessary errors in your exhibit, leaving you the time and space to produce the beautiful exhibit you are capable of creating. And one day, you may overhear a stranger standing in front of your exhibit say, “Isn’t it stunning. Let’s try to grow orchids, too!”