Judging Equitant Oncidium Hybrids

By H. Phillips Jesup

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Anyone who is or ever has been a tropical fish fancier will understand the appeal of equitant Oncidium hybrids. They resemble guppies in that no two are the same; in fact, as with guppies, the variety of colors, markings, shapes and forms seems infinite. Moving from the tropical fish hobby to our own, perhaps the best comparison to seeing a large group of equitants in flower is viewing an Odontoglossum house in the spring; the overpowering kaleidoscope of colors is merely miniaturized. No wonder that the popularity of equitant oncidiums increases!

The hybrid equitants are one of our new hybrid groups, ranking with ascocendas, miniature Cattleya types and art-shade phalaenopsis, and, as with these other groups, they are still in process of dynamic development. As we all know, the whole thing started with the efforts of one man, Goodale Moir, who made the first registration in this group in 1956 with Oncidium Helen Brown (triquetrum x variegatum). He followed with a number of additional primary crosses in the late 50's, some of which would become the basic building blocks for the fancy hybrids of today's generations. Many modern equitant Oncidium hybrids are strikingly different from anything found in nature in color and pattern. All this has occurred in approximately ten generations - a far cry from the numbers of generations that have recorded in the Cattleya group, paphiopedilums, the Odontoglossum group and others which intrigued our equally obsessed forebears in the late nineteenth century.

I think that the equitant Oncidium hybrids are even more diverse than most of the other hybrid groups, and if that is true. It is due to the startling range of genetic material within this section of the genus Oncidium. The diversity of the species components is far greater florally then vegetatively; in fact, the small fans of leaves differ in only relatively minor details, which make the hybrids a fairly homogeneous group as to plant habit.

As has been expressed by Mr. Moir, there are five species that have been the major building blocks, and most of the newer, complicated hybrids have many or all of these species in their background, often to the exclusion of any of the other twenty or so species. The five species are Oncidium triquetrum, Onc. urophyllum, Onc. pulchellum, Onc. guianense and Onc. henekenii. I will not describe them, because you should all know what they look like. The most awarded hybrid, Oncidium Golden Sunset, with 27 flower awards to date, has all of these species except Oncidium henekenii in its background - and no additional species. After the "Big Five" come what I call the "Small Five" in importance of gene contribution: Oncidium haitiense, Onc. tetrapetalum, Onc. variegatum, Onc. calochilum and Onc. velutinum. Most of the other species have been used occasionally, particularly in the early

days of equitant hybridization, and were sometimes dead-ends. There are still other species that are just now beginning to be used in hybridizing, such as Oncidium compressicaule, Onc. arizajulianum, Onc. gauntlettii and Onc. tuerckheimii.

Buying flasks or compots of equitant hybrids, or making your own crosses, can be an interesting experience. Crosses, even with roughly equivalent doses of certain species in them, vary widely in quality as grexes, despite often great variability within a cross. Even with considerable clonal variability within a cross, certain features of the cross, good or bad, are apparent in some degree in most of the siblings, and a member of a grex can often be attributed to that grex without glancing at the label - once one has seen a number of clones of that grex.

A few examples of this tendency include:

1) Oncidium Puck (Rainbow x Missy) - this cross produces usually spotted or marbled, long-lasting flowers with long rangy petals.

2) Oncidium (Frolic x Rainbow) - there is a wide range of sometimes unusual colors, but the full-blown flowers tend not to be flat and to have rather poor substance.

3) Oncidium Sunset Susie (Gold Shield x Susan Perreira) - these are mostly very poor, small, narrow, pale lavender flowers, bunched at the end of a stiff spike - good candidates for the compost heap.

4) Oncidium Bob Dugger (Gypsy Beauty x Susan Perreira) - this cross is of very high quality with large, full-lipped flowers, well-separated on the inflorescences, mostly with yellow- or bronze- overlaid lips and full, dark petals. The only fault as a grex is that flowers tend to be short-lived.

Most judging areas, with the exception of Hawaii and Florida, have not yet seen enough equitant oncidiums on the judging tables to have acquired sufficient sophistication to view them with a properly cold and fishy eye. After all, in considering flower quality, the best that exist anywhere should set the standard, as with all other orchids. The net result, in my opinion, is that perhaps up to half of the total awards given in recent years to edquitant oncidiums were not justified, or were scored too high. Of course the early awards, in most cases, would not stack up now. This is understandable, given the dramatic results of the breeders, and is a good example of necessarily rapidly changing standards in judging a particular hybrid group. Despite the strides that have been achieved in breeding, it is not easy to find clones that combine all of the qualities necessary to qualify for a flower award. For example, many of the best and most novel clones from a color standpoint have deficiencies in other areas. Of roughly 75-80 seedlings we have bloomed, from crosses made by leaders in equitant Oncidium hybridization, only three clones have received AOS

awards. This is not to say that the rest were poor; perhaps 50% were "keepers," and I apply fairly rigorous standards to what earns a permanent place in our crowded greenhouse. In short, a lot were spectacularly beautiful, though not of award quality.

While I am a believer in first assessing a clone's overall quality before considering it for pointing, here are some standards for the various components of a clone which I think should be applied to scoring every equitant Oncidium hybrid:

The flower should be full and flat in all segments, although a uniform ruffling of the edge of mid-lobe is permitted. The flower should be large (2.8 cm or better) and of heavy substance. The color should be definite, either strong and striking or a pleasing pastel. The flower can have shading or an overlay but it should not be muddy or wishy-washy. After the color has stabilized, it should not fade with time. Many clones change drastically in color shortly after opening, either lightening or darkening: pale yellow may become white, bronze may become dusky lavender, white may end up flushed lavender. The patterns and masking around the callus should be contrasting and reasonably uniform from flower to flower enhances the appearance.

The presentation of the flowers is of particular importance, since the overall, attractive effect of the flowering plant is significant in this group. I believe that the habit of the inflorescence is almost more important in equitants than in spray types with larger flowers, due to the relative smallness of the individual equitant Oncidium flower. The whole effect is what makes the "splash," and the effect can be badly marred by a poor presentation to the viewer. The ideal inflorescence is of medium length (12-18 inches) and rises at a 45 degree angle to where the bud-bearing portion begins, then becomes horizontal to slightly downward-arching, adding an element of grace. The inflorescence should hold a large number of flowers (10-25 or more). The flowers should be separated just enough so that the segments do not quite touch, and they should be positioned over at least ¼ of the total inflorescence length, not bunched in a wad at the very end. If the flowers do not all open almost simultaneously, they should at least not open successively over such a long period that first ones are old and perhaps somewhat faded when the last open. The pedicles should orient the flower so that it is tilted only slightly upward. Different species have widely differing influences, good and bad, on the habit of the inflorescence. Such include Oncidium triquetrum which produces a bunching of flowers open simultaneously. Oncidium henekenii produces successive-opening flowers, while Oncidium pulchellum and Onc. tetrapetalum produce many flowers well positioned along the inflorescence. Oncidium guianense produces flowers facing straight up.

Most equitant oncidiums produce secondary and sometimes tertiary branches on the inflorescence after the first flowers have fallen. Normally I would advise against judging the inflorescence at this point, since, with often fewer flowers present on a secondary branch,

the size and quality are apt to be enhanced beyond the normal capability of the plant. As with most orchids, culture and the number of flowers have a dramatic effect on flower quality.

Does much of the above sound like judging parameters for the Odontoglossum alliance, phalaenopsis and other spray types? If it does, it is no accident. This perhaps tends to confirm the worth of our overall criteria for judging orchids. Equitant Oncidium clones that conform to these standards seem, to me anyway, to be the "best-looking."