

Judging Pleurothallids (Except Masdevallia and Dracula)

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While they are not – and doubtless never will be – a major horticultural group in the orchids, pleurothallids have been gaining in popularity in recent years, particularly in more northern latitudes, where the cultural needs of most species can be supplied more easily. This increase in the number of pleurothallid enthusiasts seems to have been due in part to a growing emphasis on orchids of small stature. Also, the recent intensive exploration of the American tropics with an eye to the collection of pleurothallids has resulted in myriad new and intriguing forms making their appearance in collections. A welcomed flurry of activity in the classification and publication of these forms Dr. Carlyle Luer and his associates, Rodrigo Escobar, Alexander Hirtz, and Roberto Vasquez, also has been a factor in the “public relations” for this group. The marvelous diversity and “imaginative” adaptations of the pleurothallids have led enthusiasts to exclaim, “Ain’t Nature grand!”

I have excluded from this discussion the genera *Masdevallia* and *Dracula* because most of their components are sufficiently showy to belong to a different judging category. In fact, the two genera together comprise a distinct horticultural group. All of the remaining genera can be grouped together from the standpoint of general comments with respect to judging. These, as listed in *The Orchids: Natural History and Classification* by Dr. Robert L. Dressler (1981) are: *Acostaea*, *Andreettaea*, *Barbosella*, *Brachionidium*, *Chamelophyton*, *Cryptophoranthus*, *Dresserella*, *Dryadella*, *Lepanthes*, *Lepanthopsis*, *Octomeria*, *Phloeophila*, *Physosiphon*, *Physothallis*, *Platystele*, *Pleurothallis*, *Porroglossum*, *Restripia*, *Restrepiella*, *Restrepiopsis*, *Salpistele*, *Scaphosepalum*, *Stelis*, and *Trisetella*.

Since then, other genera (for example, *Apatostelis*, *Myoxanthus*, *Trichosalpinx*, and *Zootrophion*) have been erected by segregation from genera such as *Pleurothallis* and others which have been considered “catchalls” for diverse forms. In 1981, Dressler cited a figure of roughly 3,800 species within the genera listed above plus the two omitted from this discussion. Subsequently, Dr. Luer’s concerted tackling of the genus *Lepanthes* has disclosed a great number of undescribed species in this genus, a situation he is rapidly rectifying. The point to be made is that the pleurothallids are an enormous field from the taxonomic, horticultural, and judging points of view.

Statistically, there has not been a tremendous number of awards given to pleurothallids. Tabulated through October 1983, 126 awards have been granted in 15 genera (again excluding *Masdevallia* and *Dracula*, although transferring several awards out of *Masdevallia* into *Dryadella*). This figure appears to relegate the pleurothallids to a minor group from an awards and judging standpoint. And it certainly is when compared to mammoth listings of awards for such genera as *Paphiopedilum*, *Phalaenopsis*, *Cattleya*, and *Laeliocattleya*, and even *Ascocenda*. However, when compared to awards in the Zygopetalinae, a long-popular and horticulturally relatively prominent group, the

pleurothallids have a numerical advantage during the same period: Pleurothallidinae – 126 awards in 15 genera; Zygopetalinae – awards in 18 genera.

Getting away from the dry-as-dust statistics and on to something more exciting, it is interesting to note that *all* awards given to the “minor” pleurothallids to date are in the botanical area (Certificate of Botanical Merit, Certificate of Horticultural Merit, and Certificate of Botanical Recognition); cultural (Certificate of Culture Merit); and in three cases, a Judges’ Commendation, with the exception of two lonely Awards of Merit, both apparently to the same species although under different (and now superseded) names. This underscores an aspect of pleurothallid judging which relates to the small-to-tiny flowers (and plants) of most species: to compare flower quality adequately in orchids or any other plants, you generally must be dealing with flowers of some size so that differences are more apparent. The “botanical awards” are often most appropriate in this group, the CHM or floriferous gems of grace, beauty, and color and the CBR for others.

This brings me to what I feel is a serious gap in the botanical award area. Many orchids rarely seen or new to cultivation prove to be most unusual and possess unique features of educational value to the students of orchidology. The present parameters of the CBR refer only to “botanical interest,” which is broad and vague. If the CBR more specifically addressed such features as rarity, novelty, and educational value, those species which were of no great beauty but were highly distinctive in some way could be recognized and distinguished from species which, although rare, were more prosaic. Many pleurothallids, along with examples in other groups, would qualify for such recognition. An excellent example is *Barbosella circinata*, which, while one of the poorer species in the genus from the standpoint of horticultural merit, is the only known member of *Barbosella* (and one of the very few orchids) which bears its flowers with lip uppermost due to double or 360-degree resupination.

Pleurothallids are also nifty subjects to gain a CCM for their grower. Many species form sizable clumps rather quickly, given a moist, temperate environment and some tender, loving care. This due in part to the fact that most pleurothallids are very fast growers, which somehow seems contradictory when applied to small plants. If proof is demanded, just record the length of time it takes a two-inch *Pleurothallis* leaf to grow to maturity compared to a two-inch *Ornithocephalus* leaf. The pleurothallids are speedy little devils, with a high rate of metabolism, and many produce new growths freely.

More than with most orchid groups, pleurothallids tend to be judged from the effect of the entire plant in flower and, indeed, most species are attractive vegetatively as well as (and occasionally instead of) florally. From a horticultural viewpoint, those species which bloom profusely in a flush of simultaneous spikes and open flowers, displayed above the leaves, and with flowers of a color other than the commonly seen yellow-green, are often candidates for a CHM. Those which bear what have been called “cryptic little flowers” are generally not. Then there are the weird ones for the CBRs: *Myoxanthus* (formerly *Pleurothallis*) *reymondii* and *Lepanthes pilosella*, with their insect-shaped flowers, and *Pleurothallis mystax*, the specific name of which means “moustache” — for a good reason.

Things for which judges should be particularly watchful when judging pleurothallids are:

- Many species have rather fugacious flowers, so one should make sure that all flowers are fresh and not half-closed.
- Inflorescences should not be exhibited with part of the flowers already dropped unless the species is clearly successive-blooming, and even then, the spikes should not be largely spent.
- The effect of the whole plant should be symmetrical.
- The specimen should be heavily flowered *for the size of the plant* because it is the nature of most pleurothallids to flower exuberantly. Species which flower from the same growths or on the same inflorescence repeatedly over several years have a better chance of making a showy display because nearly all growths often can be in flower simultaneously, not just the current ones. One usually can tell by examination of the plant which mode is characteristic for the species and score accordingly.
- Species with racemes shorter than the leaves sometimes can make specimens so large that they are aesthetically marred because the bulk of the flowers are lost in a tangle of vegetation. I personally felt that when a plant reaches this point, a negative aspect should creep into the point scoring, for of what real worth is a well-grown plant with largely hidden flowers? *Dryadella simula* is one example of a species that can be “over-grown.”
- Some cloud forest pleurothallids require humid conditions to prevent wilting of the flowers. These species should be taken to judging, particularly in northern areas in winter, enclosed in wetted plastic bags and left in them until judging of the particular plant takes place. Wilted flowers should not be judged. Some *Stelis* species, *Pleurothallis restrepioides* (formerly *P. roezlii*), and all *Dracula* species (I wasn't going to mention them, was I?) appear to fall into this category.

The problem of judging hybrids has not reared its head in this group yet. Who needs hybrids when there is seemingly no end of winsome and odd species still coming to light in nature? Also, one needs a steady hand, 20/20 vision, and perhaps a binocular microscope to achieve pollination. To my knowledge, only a single artificial hybrid has been made within the “lesser” pleurothallids — *Lepanthes* Red Stripe (*pulchella* x *byfieldii*).

A major hang-up in the judging arena is that of familiarity of judges with such a relatively vast family. It is not artistry of Mother Nature (otherwise known as Father Natural Selection) can be passed off as that “funny little thing” or “queerie-dearie.” It is not necessary — and is quite impossible — that each judge be a pleurothallid enthusiast. But it is important that he or she become acquainted with the more common and typical species in the various genera as well as how the awarded species vary from the more “everyday” ones. Excellent sources for drawing and descriptions are early volumes of *Selbyana*, *Venezuelan Orchids Illustrated* by Dunsterville and Garay, *Icones Plantarum Tropicarum* (Ecuador, Bolivia, and Nicaragua) published by the Marie Selby Botanical Gardens, and the recent series in the *AOS Bulletin* by Dr. Carlyle Luer and associates.

The *Awards Quarterly* is the recommended (and only!) source for information on and photos of awarded pleurothallids.

An important problem of former times has been solved by the requirement that plants receiving botanical awards be positively identified by a recognized authority. Some CBM awards in the past were clearly misidentified and will carry a legacy of misinformation and confusion forever. Of course, this still can happen when a cultural award is granted. For the sake of all, it behooves one to check if any uncertainty exists.

If these species, ranging from moss-like mats and tiny tufts studded with bright flowers to stately stems bearing green hearts with red or yellow eyes to rows of fur-lined miniature bathtubs, are worth a place in collections, then they are worth judging knowledgeably. To this end, judges should strive for a basic familiarity with the genera comprising this group.