

Why Would a Grown Man Do This? - The Trials and Tribulations of an AOS Student Judge

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He: I think I'd like to become an AOS Student Judge!

She: Are you crazy? Never mind, I know the answer to that one. But why would a grown man do this?

He: It will be a learning experience.

She: Look dear. It's one thing to go to the monthly "Show and Tell" that you call an orchid society meeting. It's another thing to subject yourself to 3 years of some sort of student apprenticeship!

He: I'm not too thrilled either at the prospect of being treated as a neophyte. On the other hand, most serious orchid growers reach a point where they need to learn about standards of excellence. Whether that means going to judging simply as an observer or actually becoming a judge is neither here nor there - but judging itself is something clearly to be experienced.

She: (resignedly) If you must go, then participate. You wouldn't be able to keep quiet anyway, but I still don't understand why you'd want to be a "student" again, for any reason, even for orchids.

That dialogue between me and my wiser half took place some four years ago. I am now a Probationary Judge with the Northeast Regional Supplemental Center in New York, and I hasten to add swiftly, received a great deal of encouragement from the "she" of the above, not-so-imaginary dialogue. With the formal student period recently completed, I received an invitation from the late Maurice E. Powers, then Chairman of the Committee on Awards, to reflect on my experiences as a Student Judge. It seemed a good opportunity to address for myself, and perhaps for you as well, some concerns about the training process in general.

As most Awards Quarterly readers know, the training process to become an Accredited American Orchid Society judge requires a minimum of six years. This rite of passage is divided into an initial, minimal, 3-year student period followed (if approved by the judging community) by an additional 3 to 5 years as Probationary Judge. At the conclusion of a minimum of 3 years as a Probationary Judge, you may, if approved, be elevated to the status of Accredited Judge, a position similar to tenure in the academic community.

However, you begin to function as a certified AOS judge with the transition from student to probationary status. At this point, your score counts in determining orchid awards and, with few limitations, you act as a full-fledged judge. It is therefore the 3-year student period which constitutes the real trial.

What do student judges do? Is student judges' training, as a number of friends have asked, a somewhat demeaning experience in which a series of menial tasks must be performed as the price of admission to this rather select club? To be perfectly honest, student judges do in fact perform much of mechanical work of judging, but mechanical is not necessarily menial. Student judges act as clerks, they tabulate scoring, and very importantly, they assist in the writing of descriptions for awarded plants so necessary for the Awards Quarterly and the records of the awards system. Certainly, simple secretarial duties are not one's idea of aesthetic "derring-do," but the logistics of plant scoring and the rules of judging must be learned. Doing the peripheral work of the judging community is about as painless as education in these areas as we can come by.

Writing award descriptions is a much more demanding task and one which possesses inherent difficulties. In some judging centers of the system, student judges write the award descriptions without help or review from accredited judges. This seems a backward process. Descriptive writing is difficult enough to begin with, but award description writing is exceedingly difficult, for it requires us to put into precise, succinct sentences those elusive qualities that characterize an orchid of award-quality. To leave this process - one that requires the synthesis of extensive experience with a rich, descriptive horticultural vocabulary - to the "youngest" members of the judging community is clearly begging for trouble. Part of the problem, of course, is that an ability to create good award descriptions is not automatically conferred the moment one attains accreditation. Accredited judges cannot necessarily write sparkling descriptions either, nor, even more importantly, have they necessarily been trained to teach the art of writing them. If Shakespeare himself could admit "that a rose by any other name would smell as sweet," is it any wonder that we have difficulty describing "sweeter roses"? The most encouraging sign is that the problem of award descriptions is being increasingly discussed in judging circles and, perhaps, some remedies are in the offing.

Clerking, tabulating and even writing descriptions constitutes only a small part of what student judging is all about. The most important thing we do in student judging is to talk about orchids. It is the pleasure of this act that draws us all to judging and it is here where my biases emerge. I have done virtually all my judge's training at the Northeast Regional Supplemental center in New York. What that means is that once a month for three years, I have sat around a table with the likes of Don Richardson, Gus Mehlquist, Ben Berliner, Phil Jesup (to name only a few of the New York judges) and talked about orchids. I cannot image that the sheer quantity of information at their fingertips, and the ability to assess that

information could be surpassed anywhere. What is more important, however, is not the personalities, or even, in a sense, their knowledge; it is the process of judging as it occurs at this center which is important.

Every orchid brought in for judging is viewed by the full panel of judges together with all the student judges. Each and all judging personnel are encouraged to comment. The judging takes place before an audience and, while the audience is requested to be silent during the judging, frequently the Chairman of judges, after the judging session is over, will ask if the audience has any questions. Thus the process becomes an educational one for a wide variety of orchid growers. Discussion among the judges is forthright and rigorous, and whoever talks about a plant, from the newest student to the most senior judge, is expected to speak pointedly about the pertinent aspects of the flower and/or plant. Ex cathedra, authoritarian statements are immediately challenged. Certainly we are as opinionated a group of people as the next - who could imagine an orchid judge without strong opinions? - but there must be substantive support for even the most firmly held opinions.

From my first day as a student I have been made to feel part of a community of equals. There is a great sense of camaraderie as we work to rigorously define standards of excellence. Again, every plant submitted for consideration is discussed. No plant is beneath comment and every comment whether originating from student or senior judge is open to question and discussion. Of course, this runs the hazard of endless waxing about minute details of a plant that is clearly not of award quality. On the other hand, this approach implies a certain respect for the plant and grower that I think important. Somehow we need to remind ourselves that orchid growing is not an elitist pastime and that educating our peers is among the most important duties of a judge.

I highlight the intellectual interplay of New York judging not only to extol its virtues but to voice my concern about some subtle and not-so-subtle drifts in the judges' training system as a whole. In the new Handbook, for example, there is no longer just an authoritative tone, there is instead a somewhat authoritarian tenor. I sense increasing effort to quantify and impose narrow, confining standards on the judging centers. The increasing use of small teams and closed judging has great anti-intellectual risks: it closes the door on the diversity of views which is essential for a growing appreciation of orchids.

In a similar vein there is, I fear, a tendency towards the infantilization of student judges. Can anyone believe that mature adults committed to orchid judging year in and year out need to be "excused in advance by the regional chairman for valid reason" from attending each biannual business meeting? Certainly this smacks of grade school. While I am delighted with the new emphases on training of all judges, must everything we do be documented in a report? The paperwork seems to increase with every business meeting as we rush headlong into becoming a full-fledged bureaucracy. I worry that those who have

busy careers and family lives will shy away from judging because of its increasingly voracious demands on our time. Orchid growing and judging for most of us - no matter how intense our commitment - is still only a hobby. We should not confuse the new and welcome intellectual rigorousness in judging for rigidity in its mechanical requirements.

What prompts these concerns is that my student judging has certainly been a heady three years: full of horticultural lore (not always orchidaceous, either), insights of all sorts, extraordinary camaraderie, and, most of all, an intense, shared experience of why and how to judge excellence in orchids. I have been imbued with a sense that judging should never be static, that perceptions should never be allowed to ossify and that the horticulturally good and beautiful is as varied as the floral kingdom itself. That this sensibility can be imparted and shared in some three years is no mean feat. I only hope that I might do as well to preserve and continue this tradition.