

## Considerations in the Judging of Pleurothallids

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There has been amazing progress achieved in the acceptance and appreciation of pleurothallids, the largest group of New World orchids. In 1980, when I first joined the American Orchid Society judging system, only a few judging centers were consistently extending themselves to award these frequently tiny jewels of the plant world. Today virtually all of the AOS centers and shows are pleurothallid-friendly and there is a point scale for scoring flower-quality awards. Masdevallias, including those shown on the back cover of this *Awards Quarterly*, are among the pleurothallids to benefit from this enthusiasm.

For this acceptance, we are deeply indebted to Janet and Lee Kuhn, and their successors – the magnificent triumvirate at J & L Orchids, Phil and Ann Jesup, Ben Berliner, MD, the late FL Stevenson, and a host of others – who presented the judging community with magnificently grown species and innovative hybrids that ultimately won over virtually all of us. Perhaps the greatest contributor of all was the late Gary Baker who helped found the Pleurothallid Alliance and was instrumental in helping to devise the previously mentioned point scale. Today, we, as the second wave of pleurothallid enthusiasts, can try to build upon the good Karma that our predecessors have set down before us.

The judging of pleurothallids today focuses on four primary concerns. These are: care of the submitted plant during the judging process, the actual judging itself, identification of the submitted plants and the photography of any awards granted.

Some growers have expressed the reluctance to submit plants for judging because they fear that their charges could be or have been damaged or even killed by that process. In order to attract more plants to judging, we judges need to be more sensitive to those concerns.

Pleurothallid growers often go to considerable lengths and expense to maintain a cool, moist and buoyant cultural environment. The more experienced among them transport their plants in coolers or other refrigerated and humidified containers to get them to our judging centers in good condition. This is necessary because the flowers of so many of these plants are extremely sensitive to elevated temperatures and even more so to low humidity. If they are to be seen at their best, then they probably should be judged first, before they can be degraded by what is for them a hostile physical environment, our judging location.

To facilitate that outcome, the judging chair might wish to consider requests by exhibitors to keep plants and flowers in cooled, humidified containers as much as possible during the judging process. Naturally this is not going to be easy because nearly everyone wants to look at these plants.

At the Cincinnati Center, we nominate plants by having the entire cadre of judges, ballots in hand, circulate around tables holding the plants. Since we have sometimes been fortunate enough to have 50 or more plants brought to judging, the process can take a half hour or more to complete, enough time to seriously degrade the condition of some pleurothallids. The judging team that gets a plant for AOS consideration may then indulge their interest with a considerable amount of poking and prodding. It strikes me as ironic that teams that most appreciate pleurothallids are probably the hardest on them.

Everybody on the team wants to examine the flowers in exhaustive detail, usually under bright light and magnification. Additionally, all flowers need to be measured, and, if awarded, described in detail. It is a wonder that we get any ghost of the original flower to the photographer.

By the judging chair's exercising some discretionary power in limiting access to certain plants and instructing team captains to limit unnecessary handling or exposure of the flowers, we may yet give our photographers something to record. Certainly we cannot complain about their work if we made their jobs virtually impossible before they even remove a lens cap.

The pleurothallid point scale by which we can now grant flower-quality awards to this group of flowers is a major advancement. Detailed examination of its components, however, quickly convinces one that it was primarily devised for use with masdevallias. It allows no points for the labellum, for example, but three for caudae. Applying these criteria to a *Pleurothallis cardiothallis* that has a significant labellum, but no caudae, illustrates the problems we could encounter in how points are allocated within the domains of color, form and other characteristics. Team captains could arrive at a consensus among team members as to how points would be distributed. In extreme cases we could even revert to the General Scale if nothing else seems to fit.

Fortunately, many pleurothallids are species being considered for a Certificate of Botanical Recognition (CBR) which requires no point scoring or a Certificate of Horticultural Merit (CHM) which uses a different point scale. Greater latitude is provided when these flowers and plants are considered for a Certificate of Cultural Merit (CCM). The 20 points derived from condition of flower, however, again focuses attention on the importance of preserving the flowers during judging.

In granting the CBR, CHM or a flower-quality award to any previously unawarded species, the exhibitor is required to have the plant identified by an AOS-approved taxonomist. This means that our centers are swamped with provisional awards waiting for confirmation of their identity. Additionally, this imposes a financial burden on the AOS since they still have to pay for the cost of photography on these awards even if they subsequently are invalidated. (One possible solution may be to require exhibitors to bring only previously identified plants to judging. The definitive source of plant identification in the pleurothallids is, of course, Carlyle A. Luer, MD, of Sarasota, Florida. He is extremely kind in taking the time to provide his services.)

My final concern deals with the photography of awarded plants. The use of intensely bright and hot lighting has not completely disappeared from the centers and shows. This is an extreme disincentive to some pleurothallid growers to submit their plants for our consideration. They justifiably fear that their plants will be placed at risk. At the Cincinnati Center we are fortunate to have the services of Jim McCulloch, a skilled photographer.

McCulloch does not use incandescent lights due to their tendency to pour out excessive heat. He does use a 100-watt modeling light to set up his framing and composition, as well as to see the combination of lights and darks. The actual photography is done using two stand-mounted electronic discharge or strobe lights, each within a soft-box to decrease shadows. These give off a quick burst of very bright light synchronized with the camera shutter. The camera itself is a 35mm Nikon using a 55mm macro lens. For very small flowers he will use an extension tube or bellows. Exposure time is typically 1/90<sup>th</sup>

of a second at f22 to maximize depth of field. But McCulloch uses a flash meter to calculate correct exposure. His film is Ektachrome EPN 100, a special professional film which he has to keep refrigerated until it is used.

Along with continued acceptance and appreciation of these tiny jewels and the flourishing of pleurothallid-friendly judging centers, my hope is more pleurothallid growers will soon recognize they are welcomed and encouraged to submit plants for judging. Exhibitors should take advantage of this awareness and express their concerns with judging chairs. The progress achieved in the past few years combined with a sensitive judging program, perpetuates a favorable system which the entire orchid community can benefit from and enjoy.

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### *AOS Judging of Pleurothallids*

#### **Point Scale for Judging Pleurothallids**

Flower Form		
General Form	20	
Dorsal Sepal	4	
Lateral Sepals	8	
Caudae	3	
Subtotal		35
Color of Flower		
General Color	20	
Dorsal Sepal	5	
Lateral Sepals	10	
Subtotal		35
Other Characteristics		
Size of Flower	10	
Substance and Texture	7	
Habit and Arrangement of Inflorescence(s)	5	
Floriferousness	8	
Subtotal		30
Total		100

Notes on Judging Pleurothallids from the *AOS Handbook on Judging and Exhibition, 10<sup>th</sup> Edition (1997)*

The members of the Pleurothallidinae are extremely diverse, so general criteria for all species and hybrids cannot be given. Some flowers, especially members of the section *Coccineae* of the genus *Masdevallia*, have flowers of striking colors and relatively flat form. Often the sepals are relatively broad in this group, and the desired form is toward fullness and, in some taxa, roundness. In other pleurothallids, the sepals may be very narrow, twisted or otherwise unusual. In addition, the form may be cup-shaped, bowl-shaped or even tubular. Ideally, the edges of the sepals should not reflex nor should the

sepals be asymmetrically twisted, particularly in hybrids. Caudae (sepaline tails) may be short or elongated, depending on type, and may extend outward or be crossed. What is important is the overall aesthetic appearance of the caudae to the general form of the flower. Caudae and sepals may reflex; however, the generally desired trait is for no (or minimal) reflexing. The prominent parts of the flower are generally the sepals and the sepaline tube. Petals and sepals are usually quite insignificant.

**Carlyle A. Luer Pleurothallid Award**

Given by the AOS Trustees to the grower of the species or hybrid pleurothallid that is regarded as the most outstanding to have been awarded during the previous year. It was established by The Pleurothallid Alliance and the friends of Carlyle A. Luer, MD, in 1992, to honor this man's taxonomic studies of these New World orchids.