

Size is Only 10 Points

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The General Point Scale for quality flower awards as set by the American Orchid Society's *Handbook on Judging and Exhibition* (Sixth Edition) allots 10 points for size. The AOS Scale for Horticultural Merit rates size as 12 points. And yet, sometimes an AOS Judge pulls out his or her ruler first thing, measures the natural spread of an orchid flower, compares it with a previous award and says, "It won't make it." Period. It is a temptation to do this because measurements are definite, whereas other flower qualities are a matter of judgment.

But size is only 10 points!

Is bigger better? Not necessarily. And probably not. The late Bruno W. Alberts, who was an artist before he was an orchid grower, once told me, "the larger the flower is, the better it must be because the size exaggerates the other characteristics." This came at a time when Bruno was breeding *Laeliocattleya Canhamiana*, big orchids being in demand on the cut-flower market. But to please him, his hybrids had to have better color, form, proportion, balance and substance because they were big.

Does "size" always mean big? No! An orchid flower should be commended for its smaller size if it makes a more pleasing flower. Perhaps the term should be "proportion and balance" instead of size. Some of the diminutive cattleyas and phalaenopsis, for instance, are more charming because they are small. As for ascocendas, the original idea was to miniaturize the vandas, yet some of the advanced hybrids of ascocendas compare in plant and flower size with vandas. This is not to say a big ascocenda flower is not good, only that a smaller one might be of equally high quality.

Look at a big cattleya flower. If the color is muddy, it is more obvious because the flower is big. If it does not have extra substance to support the large segments, it is droopy. Mind you, a large flower of any orchid genus can be spectacular. But only if it excels in other qualities. Big orchids may go the way of gas-guzzling cars because we are all short on space for our plants.

In the early days of the American Orchid Society Awards, the Awards Register listed only the name of the flower, the parentage, the award and the owner. The first awards were given in 1932. Not until page 52 of the Awards Register under the list for January 1949 does any description accompany the record. The measurements given then were only for the petals and dorsal sepals.

I have no quarrel with recording the measurements in detail for the record (although I am not yet attuned to the required – and inevitable – metric system). Fortunately AOS Judges are being urged to write more descriptive descriptions, which will record the qualities that earned the award. In the minds of experienced judges, I am sure the points for "size" are figured by their mental calculations of the pleasing proportion and balance of the flower

segments. The best way to measure flower size is with the eye. The ruler should be³ used only after the scores are added up to record the measurements.