

## Judging Ceratobium Dendrobiums in New Guinea

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The Orchids of Papua New Guinea are among the most beautiful in the world. They were first introduced in the late 1890s and 1900s. Five thousand plants of the lovely *Dendrobium atrovioleaceum* were collected on Rossel Island and sent to Sanders, in England, one of the greatest orchid firms the world has ever known. The plants all died. No one knew how to grow them.

After the Second World War and the influx of Caucasian immigration into Papua New Guinea, much interest was shown in the orchids of this lovely country. Internal communications were practically nonexistent so almost any orchid from Papua New Guinea created a sensation. Many hybrids were made from these early discoveries, and a lot of the resulting off-spring were truly awful. Today the story is different. Education of growers and scientific application of the knowledge gained have made orchid breeding both a successful hobby and a commercial success.

Many people who grew nothing but splashy hybrids are now turning back to the perfection of the small species. The big ones are still grown commercially for use in corsages and wedding bouquets, hotel decorations and other domestic uses, but the number of hobby growers choosing species is increasing every day.

One of the genera in favor is *Dendrobium*, particularly the *Ceratobium* section. Papua New Guinea has more of these species than any other country in the world. There are a few in Australia and also some in Indonesia, but the island of New Guinea is the source of their greatest concentration. They come in all colors, from small, dainty ones like *Dendrobium antennatum* to the huge, man-tall specimen plants of *Dendrobium discolor* on the Fly River and *Dendrobium lasianthera* (Sepik Blue) at Lake Ymas and *Dendrobium violacea-flavens* at the top of the May River.

In the competitive world of commercial growers, buyers from Europe have told us at the last two ASEAN Conferences that the people of the E.E.C. (European Economic Community) are becoming tired of the stiff shapes of the vandas, arandas, and arachnis and are looking for something softer and daintier such as the spray-type dendrobiums.

Most of the rules made for judging dendrobiums of the Ceratobium section have been made by people, who, though they may have grown orchids for years, have seen relatively few of these orchids. They are judging them against other orchids and using the same rules. This should not be done. They do not have the same shape or the same habit of growth. As with children in one family, each one's appearance may differ from the other. So it is with orchids. You can find three *Dendrobium discolor* in the same tree, on the same day, and each one can be very different in color and shape from the other. Realizing this possible difference is what good Ceratobium judging is all about.

At an A.O.S. judging seminar in Ann Arbor last October (in Michigan, U.S.A.), I was asked to discuss *Ceratobium dendrobiums* and to give the rules by which I judge, and by which I think they should be judged.

The following are the minimum expectations which I consider are necessary for award-quality *Ceratobium dendrobiums*:

- 1. Labellum wide, flat and symmetrically tipped** — This is what we call the “lip,” immediately below the petals and between the lateral sepals. It is basically divided into three parts, the side lobes, the mid lobes and the tip.  
The side lobes at the back are at their best when wide-spread and flattish; they stick out on each side. You should judge this point against what you know is best in the variety you are judging. There is great variability in the shape of the side lobes. When you are judging think back to the best plant you have ever seen, and award your points by that standard, e.g. the Bensbach form of *Dendrobium discolor*.<sup>1</sup>
- 2. Side lobes of the labellum flat** rather than curved over the labellum — This requirement goes with Number 1, but you know the old proverb, “the exception proves the rule.” There is one species where the side lobes are curved over the labellum: the variety of *Dendrobium discolor* we call the “Rigo Twist.” This varies in color from bright yellow through all the shades of gold to dull khaki. In a good form, the side lobes curve over the column and their crimped edges just meet in the middle. If the edges overlap, or one is larger than the other, it loses points. This illustrates the judging points very clearly: if the flower is the type which has wide-spreading side lobes, they should be even, flat and conform to the best in the type. If the plant is in the “Rigo Twist” section, then its parts are twisted evenly, sepals, petals and tip, but the side lobes must meet evenly over the column, at the very middle of the column.
- 3. Lateral sepals wide-spread and symmetrical** — This means that the two lower sepals should turn outwards evenly: one should not turn under at the edge; one should not be bigger than the other; and if their edges are wavy, they should be evenly so.
- 4. Petals upright**, equidistant from midline, twisted equally and in the same direction — The petals balance the flower, and this is the first characteristic you look at. In *Dendrobium antennatum*, the petals are almost vertical above the column, usually twice twisted, yellow or green and very glossy. *Dendrobium lineale*, in all its forms, has petals at almost a 45-degree angle from the base of the column. Whatever slight angle the petals have, they should be equal and both straight. If the top of one petal leans to either side, or either or both are floppy and limp, check that flower against all others on the stem. It often happens that in transit to a show a flower can be damaged, and this presentation is not a regular characteristic of the inflorescence. Look at this carefully and make your decision justly. Large plants which travel long distances to shows are lucky indeed to escape without a bruise or two. This is different from a genetic fault.

5. **Dorsal sepal upright** or curved slightly backwards: if curved over and under in a complete circle, it must be firm and not falling to one side or the other. A good example of this is *Dendrobium wariatum*, from many parts of the coast of Papua, and particularly from the islands of Milne Bay. The upper sepal in this *Ceratobium dendrobium* curls right back and over in a full and perfect circle. Very rarely do you see one of these badly shapen, whereas in some of the species, the upper sepal is very sloppy indeed. A notable example of this is *Dendrobium lasianthera*.

*Dendrobium lasianthera* is one of our most beautiful “antelope” dendrobiums but it is hard to find a perfect flower. The dorsal sepal flops to either side, twisted or half-twisted. When you do research this species, as I did on several trips to the Sepik and the May River, you get some very good ones, such as the one we found at lake Ymas and called ‘Veronica Somare’ after the wife of our then Prime Minister; or the one from May River we called ‘Madame Soeharto’ on the occasion of her state visit.

These good forms are hard to find in large orchid populations, but they are there and that is what makes award judging so important. If you know what the highest standard is, you will keep on trying to find it. It is this kind of searching that so often turns up a superb form that can be used to perfection in the hybridizing program.

6. **Clear colors** — This is quite simple and means what it says. Colors should be clean and pure, not smudged or looking as if they have been applied by a child finger-painting expert. Nevertheless, it is well to know all about your species before you make a quick decision. Color within the species is very variable, and any species can have several color forms or color combinations.

When judging, a ceratobium such as *Dendrobium lineale*, there are several color forms. The typical one which first came to notice was the one we call the “Morobe Shower.” Petals and sepals are a clear, flat white, and the lines on the side lobes and top of the labellum are a clear, dark purple. The purple coloring is variable, often paler and the white not as crisp and clear as it should be. This should have been more carefully observed in the numerous hybrids formed from it. The blue form of *Dendrobium lineale* is usually beautifully shaped, an even purplish-blue with clear, dark purple lines, but not always. There are some variations with yellow side lobes and some with an overall pinkish color. There is no guarantee that these variations will be preserved and appear in hybrids.

Don’t let yourself get side-tracked by color variations. Color is the last of the basic six judging categories. Look first for perfection in shape and what is expected of the plant. It is no good to you as a collector, to you society, or for the good of orchidology, if you go into squeals of delight over the color of the dorsal sepals of a blue *Den. lineale*, if the shape is wrong, one sepal bent sideways or whatever.

7. **Symmetrical arrangement on inflorescence** — This means that the flowers are arranged on the stem so that, for example, they look well in a vase. The desirable forms are those whose flowers are equally spaced around the stem

or which all face the same way. An untidy arrangement of flowers does nothing for anyone and should not win points.

8. **Unblemished floral parts** — A plant should not win an award if a nasty little caterpillar has chewed a piece out of one petal. This means you have not been attending to your plants and providing routine maintenance. If the flower is spotted or one sepal has grown out with wrinkled edges, when it shouldn't, then it gets no marks for category 8. But this is entirely up to the discretion of the judges. If it is obvious that the damage was caused after the flower has opened, perhaps by insect damage or by being watered in the sun, or perhaps by a sudden hot wind, a judge may be inclined to be a little more lenient. Much judging of unfamiliar material is done by appreciation (not by me, I back out if I don't know). A lot is up to the grower: if a flower grows in a deformed way every time it flowers, don't put it up for judging. It might look nice in the garden but leave it off the judging table.

The *Ceratobium* section of the genus *Dendrobium* — the “antelope dendrobiums” and their many hybrids — are among the most beautiful orchids which Papua New Guinea has given to the orchid world. While quite popular in the Hawaii Judging Region, these lovely plants are not seen as much as they should be in other orchid-growing regions of your country. Proper judging is therefore rather difficult. Hopefully time — and more growers attempting the *Ceratobium* section and its hybrids — will remedy this situation.