

The Certificate of Cultural Merit

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Of all the American Orchid Society judging awards, the Certificate of Cultural Merit is the only one granted to an individual, not to a plant or an exhibit. The definition of this award reads: "The Certificate of Cultural Merit is awarded to the exhibitor of a specimen plant of robust health and appearance with an unusually large number of flowers. The plant must have been in the care of the exhibitor for at least six (6) months immediately prior to the Award. Must score 80 points or over on Point Scale #10, Cultural Merit. Photographs and description of plant as well as number of flowers and inflorescences required."

Since it is not a requirement that AOS judges *must* judge a certain number of times outside their region during a calendar year, and since the cultural environments of the various regions often vary considerably, the awarding of the Certificate of Cultural Merit to owners of different plants of the same species or hybrid will also vary, often quite dramatically. Nowhere in the definition for the CCM is there any statement as to the potential effect of environmental conditions on plants. In fact, as you can see, the definition is very slight, demanding only good health, appearance and an unusually large number of flowers. Whether the term "unusually" should be comparative or relative is the question.

A vandaceous plant, grown in Florida, with an unusually large number of flowers as determined by the collective experience of primarily southern-based judges, may prove, when grown in cooler climates, impossible to duplicate – even under the best of available cultural practices. The reverse is also true. Cool-growing odontoglossums and paphiopedilums may be grown into lushly flowered plants in the northeast and northwest, an achievement nearly impossible to duplicate in warmer climates despite excellent cultural care. Since the Certificate of Cultural Merit is granted not to the plant but to the efforts of an individual, should it not therefore take into account the factors surrounding those efforts? The question remains: one, should there be but one standard of cultural perfection for any species or hybrid based upon the most floriferous clones, those grown superbly well in conditions perfectly suited to them; or two, should be the standards of cultural merit be tempered, carefully, to the environmental conditions to which a grower is restricted? The Certificate of Cultural Merit, granted to the individual, is then a relative award, not a comparative one.

This basic question has occurred occasionally at judging seminars and regional judgments. It is a difficult question, for the problem of assessing relatively is much more difficult than assessing comparatively. When doubtful situations occur, judges have usually referred to previously published CCMs for that species or hybrid, awarding the plant only if it equals or exceeds the number of flowers on the previously awarded clone.

It is, of course, extremely important to consult every pertinent award description prior to judging. A frame of reference is essential before agreement or disagreement with any

previous standard, accurate or not, is possible. When this is not done, or for unstated reasons apparently disregarded, puzzling awards can occur. We note this in the three award pictures, published with their descriptions, of clones of *Dendrobium aggregatum*, a highly awarded species for which much published information is available.

The three awarded clones span eight years of judging. The earliest and the latest were grown in Florida, the middle clone in a warm region of California. Cultural conditions could be presumed reasonably similar. We note from the award descriptions that the number of flowers on these three plants is almost bafflingly illogical. In 1968, *Dendrobium aggregatum* 'Papaya' received a CCM of 82 points with a total of 44 spikes with 1400 flowers (and in 1974 received a CCM of 91 points with 57 spikes and 1710 flowers). Similarly awarded clones previously published, did possess somewhat fewer flowers though not appreciably so. In 1973, however, *Dendrobium aggregatum* 'Amy Fuchs' received a CCM of 93 points (or rather, with the change in definition, the exhibitor received the CCM) with only 500 flowers. There is nothing in this reasonably modern award description to indicate reasons for the award being so at variance with previously published CCMs. For example, even though the number of flowers would appear to be far too few to gain such a high number of points, perhaps the condition of the plant, the number of growths etc., were so outstanding that this provided the reason for the 93-point CCM. It could also be that the judges felt that the clone 'Papaya' was extremely underscored. Close perusal of the award photograph reveals a third and probably accurate reason. The plant may not be *Dendrobium aggregatum*, which flowers with a raceme of upwards of 15 flowers, but, instead, *Dendrobium aggregatum* var. *jenkinsii* or *Dendrobium jenkinsii*, which usually produces but one or two flowers per pseudobulb. Whether this is true or not remains a moot question. The point is that the plant was apparently judged under the name *Dendrobium aggregatum* and thus compared, rather strangely, to previous CCM-*Dendrobium aggregatum* clones. As a scale against which to judge future *Dendrobium aggregatum* plants, the clone 'Amy Fuchs', however lovely and beautifully grown in its own right, is rather unfortunately useless. Particularly so when we see other clones awarded in the same region that same year. *Dendrobium aggregatum* 'Bea's Beauty', not shown, received a CCM of 86 points in Florida in 1973 with 750 flowers. While this scoring is still high in reference to the initial judging of *Dendrobium aggregatum* 'Papaya', it seems more reasonable.

Several *Dendrobium aggregatum* were awarded in the intervening years with *Dendrobium aggregatum* 'Florida Gold' receiving a Certificate of Cultural Merit of 85 points with 950 flowers in 1976. Despite some discrepancies, it would appear that the judging of *Dendrobium aggregatum*, as grown in warmer climates, was becoming standardized, and a good comparative record created.

What about the relative record mentioned earlier? Have there been any discrepancies in the scorings of clones of the same species or hybrid, grown in totally different environments? Could one really call them discrepancies? The three pictures of *Brassavola perrinii* clones illustrate the problem intriguingly.

A Certificate of Cultural Merit of 82 points was given to the exhibitor of *Brassavola perrinii* 'Julia', in Florida in 1969. The clone displayed 106 flowers, and the description read accordingly. In 1973, a CCM of 86 points was granted to the exhibitor of *Brassavola perrinii* 'Seminole', also Florida grown. The clone displayed 350 flowers. The 4-point difference in points does not seem to equate with a 200-plus difference numbers of flowers. Again, the award descriptions seem isolated. Nothing in the later description of the clone 'Seminole' indicates that the judges took into account – though I am sure they must – the previous judging of the clone 'Julia'. No clear cut standard for this species, in Florida, could be said to exist by 1973.

To complicate matters even further, the exhibitor of *Brassavola perrinii* 'Timmie' received a Certificate of Cultural Merit of 84 points in 1973, in the northeast area. The plant had 68 flowers. This number of flowers is considerably less than all clones of the species awarded up to 1973. Was this inaccurate judging? Or was it judging in response to the limitations of environmental conditions? The New England area, on the whole, cannot be said to be as conducive to the floriferous culture of warm-growing, light-loving species, such as *Brassavola perrinii*, as the southeast or southwest areas. Hence, it may be unfair to demand the same ability of a grower in the northeast, with certain species and hybrids, as a grower in warmer areas. And of course, vice versa. *Brassavola perrinii* 'Timmie' may, in the opinion of the northeast judges, have seen superbly grown and flowered – for a northern set of environmental conditions. Indeed, the award description praises the floriferousness of the plant. Unfortunately, no discussion of relative environmental conditions exists within the description. The reader can only assume what he should have been told directly.

The question is further complicated when one views the last of the pictured plants of *Brassavola perrinii*, the clone 'Malvern' which received, for its exhibitor, a CCM of 86 points in 1976. The plant displayed 320 flowers. It was, however, also grown in the northeast. So much for the theory of relativity?

Possibly! And yet, we must not forget that the clone 'Timmie' was judged at a time when only southern grown clones of the species had been judged and described. A valid reason thus existed for an award with far fewer flowers – if the judges had only indicated that they were judging relatively, not comparatively and that the clone 'Timmie' was a finely flowered clone, relative to their region, though not when compared to clones from other, more hospitable regions. On the other hand, the clone 'Malvern' might well have been underscored. Perhaps it displayed more than an average CCM cultural effort (86 points). If *Brassavola perrinii* 'Timmie' provided, by 1976, the published basis for cultural excellence in the northeast for that species, then *Brassavola perrinii* 'Malvern' should have scored considerably higher than it did, for the judging to be logical. Which is true? Unfortunately, without the necessary perspective between the various judgments appearing within each succeeding award description, without some articulated yea or nay concerning the question of environmental conditions affecting culture, each CCM judging appears like an island, each connected to the other only by a stretch of uncrossable water.

It seems particularly appropriate that more attention be paid to the question of environmental influence when judging for a Certificate of Cultural Merit. We have seen several problems with greenhouse-grown clones – those pictured in this discussion. We must realize however that new cultural environments are assuming greater and greater positions of importance in the orchid world – the environments of windowsill and, particularly, of fluorescent light culture. These environments have built in restrictions which may prove, for quite a few years yet, insuperable to growers – there is only so much light possible in the vast majority of fluorescent light collections. Is it therefore fair or logical to demand of a fluorescent light or windowsill grower that he or she produce plants abundantly flowered as a greenhouse grower? The effort and cultural expertise, within the former environments, may equal or outstrip that of the greenhouse grower; results, however, may be less in number. Once again, we are reminded that the Certificate of Cultural Merit is granted, not to a plant, but to an exhibitor. Thus it seems almost imperative that the judging for a CCM, in some way, must take into account the fundamental conditions in which the grower has developed his submitted plant.

At the present time, no formal rules or guidelines for judging in this manner exist within the *Handbook on Judging and Exhibition*. Judging along these lines does, however, occasionally occur. Because no formal statement or discussion has appeared, such judgments are often haphazard. Should we not address ourselves too this most important aspect of the Certificate of Cultural Merit as swiftly and as clearly as possible?