

## The Judgment of Words – 2

By Richard Peterson

Published in Awards Quarterly Vol. 11, No. 2, April 1980, page 55-58

In this second article of a small series concerning award descriptions, I would like to emphasize, once again, that my concern lies only with the language of the award descriptions cited, not with the judgments expressed. Articulating a judging apprehension is a treacherous action. You may skirt the shoals of jargon only to run aground on the reefs of Poesy. There are no north stars to guide us, nor judging rules that yield the secrets of accurate, indicative description. Despite this, or perhaps because of it, the expression of our judging – the judgment of words – is becoming to many of us an increasingly more interesting and important facet of the awards system.

In the January 1979 *Awards Quarterly*, Volume 10, Number 1, within an article titled “Overawarding?,” I discussed the implications of continuing to award clones from crosses whose historical award record is great – *Cymbidium Lillian Stewart*, for example, with 84 awards – or clones from crosses in which the majority are exceptional clones with little apparent difference from clone to clone – *Paphiopedilum Berenice*, for example. Offering no answer to this problem, I did conjecture whether consideration should be paid to such crosses in terms of an Award of Quality, or similarly appropriate award, and “...then to proceed very cautiously with the further awarding of individual clones, granting such awards only when truly unique clones are uncovered...” At moments like these, when “winners,” as at the Olympics, might be determined by tenths of a second, or by millimeters, or by subtle variances of hue, the precise award description is crucial in the creation of an historical award record. Such a description need not be lengthy. Consider the brief but useful description of *Paphiopedilum Berenice* ‘Catrinka’, AM/AOS on page 72 (the color illustration appears on page 56). The writer has accomplished four important tasks: **1.** recognition of the standardized excellence of the cross of *Paphiopedilum Berenice*; **2.** condensation of the research of existing records on previously awarded *Paphiopedilum Berenice* clones into several helpful phrases; **3.** indication of the measurable differences between the ‘Catrinka’ clone and other *Paphiopedilum Berenice* clones; and **4.** provision of a historical perspective for judges considering, in the future, other clones of this beautiful but “difficult” cross. All this was done without excess verbiage or critical, *ex post facto* assessment of previous judgments. It is a simply stated yet considerably helpful award description.

Additional examples in which judging personnel, creating an award description, have fortunately taken the time both to research and to express the results of that research do exist. Within crosses in which little previous awarding has occurred – as opposed to the highly awarded crosses exemplified by *Paphiopedilum Berenice* – the chance to create a cumulative descriptive record is easier to achieve. On page 48 the award description of *Paphiopedilum Psyche* ‘Eureka’, AM/AOS (86 pts) clearly states the narrow, judging margin of difference between that clone and *Paphiopedilum Psyche* ‘The Giant’, AM/AOS (84 pts). Both clones are pictured in color on page 56. The 2-point increase of one AM over the other is given a specific foundation to which users of the awards record may refer; for, by inference, the ‘Eureka’ clone matches the ‘The Giant’ clone in all other

judging categories. Subsequent clones of *Paphiopedilum* Psyche, presented for judging consideration, can now be more easily compared to these two awarded clones through the award descriptions – and, of course, the published color illustrations. A similar situation also exists for *Vanda* Sinard ‘Too Goo Doo’, AM/AOS (84 pts) whose award description appears on page 40 and whose color illustration appears on page 57. The stated comparison to the previously awarded, HCC-flowering is extremely helpful, particularly since few award photographs were taken of HCC-awarded plants at that time. The award descriptions, in both cases cited above, do not exist in a vacuum but are now useful parts of a continuum of comparative judging.

The type of descriptive language most suitable for award descriptions is a debatable point. Peruse the award descriptions of two species illustrated in this centerspread – *Nenbathiea perrieri* ‘Lil’, CBR/AOS and *Robiquetia paniculata* ‘Knob Creek’, CBR/AOS – on pages 49 and 53, respectively. Two different styles of descriptive language are evident, quasi-poetic in the former, quasi-scientific in the latter. The Certificate of Botanical Recognition is given to a species previously unawarded. Hence little if any written description may exist within the horticultural literature. The accuracy of the award description is thus doubly important in order for the recording of this “new” species to be truly valuable. The language used in the description of *Neobathiea perrieri* ‘Lil, CBR/AOS creates an image of that species which is both delineative and evocative. The use of phrases such as “shepherd’s staff” and “medieval halberd,” while possibly frowned on by some as “unscientific,” at least to me gives a sense of what the judges felt was novel concerning the species. Their delight in this novel species is also conveyed both by the images and by the responses evoked from the readers; the award description thus operates on several levels of analysis. Restraint in the usage of such “poetic” descriptive language is obviously essential. Some usage, carefully orchestrated, will certainly aid in conveying the difficult qualities of aesthetic appeal, novelty, rarity, covered by both the CBR and CHM.

On the other hand, the award description of *Robiquetia paniculata* ‘Knob Creek’, CBR/AOS studiously avoids evocative language, concentrating on using immediately recognizable botanical terms to convey an accurate, visual concept of the species. While one may wonder, in the phrase “awarded as an unusual species,” just exactly what it is that is unusual, the term “scrotiform spur” has as much validity and usefulness, in its formulatic way, as the more poetic “spur” ...in shape of shepherd’s staff. Would it be too easy to say that an intelligent mingling of both types of descriptive language might result in an accurate and evocative award description? In any event, the writers of both descriptions have certainly aided future judges greatly, as those judges come to analyze past judgments, by pushing their language beyond the jargon phrases so much as part of the judging vocabulary.

The absence of language such as the above may now become more noticeable in a number of otherwise useful award descriptions. Compare the descriptions of *Kefersteinia sanguinolenta* ‘Pheasant Hill, CBR/AOS (page 38) and *Kefersteinia elegans* ‘J&L’, CHM/AOS (page 73). Only the latter is illustrated on both page 57 and page 73. An evocative award description of the unillustrated *Kefersteinia sanguinolenta* ‘Pheasant

Hill' CBR/AOS is very important, for, in terms of shape and color, we should not too swiftly assume that *K. sanguinolenta* resembles other kefersteinias. It is, after all, a CBR-awarded *Kefersteinia* species and therefore, we would assume, "novel." The introduction of phrasing in either of the descriptive styles previously discussed might have imbued the clear color description with information more aligned to the requirements of the CBR. On the other hand, good color illustrations exist of *Kefersteinia elegans* 'J & L', CHM/AOS, and the horticultural merit of this species may thus be more "provable" to future judges. In addition, the award description of *Kefersteinia elegans* 'J&L', CHM/AOS goes a step beyond that of *Kefersteinia sanguinolenta* 'Pheasant Hill', CBR/AOS by introducing qualitative judgments, reflecting the judges' apprehensions. Phrases such as "interesting display" and "charming miniature" are attempts at capsuling aesthetic response in addition to physical properties. This is certainly important to do. The questions of "why interesting?" and "why charming?" remain, at least to me, unanswered in this description. If they have been answered at the time of judging, should not the award description express the judges' determinations more fully?

An instance in which imaginative color description helps to save the day occurs within the award description of the unillustrated *Miltonidium* Yellow Monarch 'Carimo', HCC/AOS (77 pts) on page 41. Fortunately all HCC-awarded clones are now photographed but a great number of such awarded plants do exist for which we shall probably never have a pictorial record. The color description is extremely crucial in such instances. A proper assessment of color and its verbal explanation are immensely tricky to accomplish. An infinite variety of physical hues exist. The apprehension of these hues is severely limited by the perception of each individual viewer. Infinitely variable language exists by which to capture a lasting impression of these hues, limited by the perception and linguistic ability of the writer of the award description. Obviously the task is doomed to a complex and fascinating failure from the beginning. All we can hope for is a better and better approximation, in language, of what we think we see. One of the ways to achieve this better approximation is to use language which is both narrowly connotative and accessible to the experience of the readers. For example, the term "canary color" would be inappropriate in describing *Miltonidium* Yellow Monarch 'Carimo', HCC/AOS. Canaries, after all, come in all assorted "flavors" today! A better approximation of what the judges apparently saw is the phrase actually used in the description – "vibrant canary yellow." Deficiencies occur here as well, for who can put a label to the subtle range of yellow. Neither I, nor you, nor any color chart can truly do this. We only approximate! Additional phrases within the award description of *Miltonidium* Yellow Monarch 'Carimo', HCC/AOS such as "subdued greenish" and "random rust" mingle judgment and physical description within a single phrase and, combined with additional, comparative, physical description – "*macranthum*-type rambling spike" – yield an increasingly clearer verbal picture of the clone.

Within the articles "Describing Awarded Orchids" and "The Certificate of Cultural Merit," in the April 1978 and October 1978 Awards Quarterly, respectively, I lamented, with you I am sure, over the unhelpful barrenness of so many cultural award descriptions. How often have these award descriptions commenced with "A well-grown plant..." as if to imply that judges would award a CCM to a grower whose plant was not well grown.

Stating the obvious, in this case the given, is distracting in an awards description. When the given exists as the total description, the awards description is useless. Good CCM descriptions do occur, with greater frequency now, and an example of a very good one exists within the award description of *Rhynchostylis gigantea* 'Siam', CCM/AOS (97 pts.) on page 70 (color illustration on page 57). How fortunate we are that the description, while simply stated, answers so many questions in one's mind, for the CCM of 97 points is one of the highest point scores every given for this award.

"Impeccably grown" may seem, at first, simply a variation on the old theme of "well-grown." Closer examination of the supporting remarks will reveal the extreme qualification of the judges' assessment of the grower's efforts, conveyed through the word "impeccably." In addition, in every instance, the physical qualifications of the plant are accurately described: measurements, flower quantity, type of growing container, etc. Even more importantly, the facets other than abundance of flowers for which one judges a CCM – vegetative quality, uniform presentation of inflorescences, general aesthetic appearance – are all dealt with in the description. Further, the historical perspective of the clone is addressed through references to its previous history of culture and awarding. The concluding statement of a decided improvement as the major factor for an additional award creates in the reader's mind a clear understanding of the high point score for this clone.

Lastly: a reminder that judges, like everyone else, are human, and their responses to plants or flowers they are considering are not primarily or even finally purely quantitative. Sometimes you just like a flower! The award description for *Brassolaeliocattleya* Beauford Fisher 'Rococo', AM/AOS (86 pts) found on page 66 (color illustration on page 56) contains, in addition to the routine physical description of the flower, a "...Chairman's note: a truly magnificent plant." I was delighted to see this simple phrase. I was made immediately aware that judging orchids is a dynamic art – people, and their emotions and intellects are involved. The cut and dried phraseology of award descriptions momentarily came alive. It is to this life, really, which my sentences concerning evocative language, apprehension, qualitative judgment, "complex failure," have been addressed. A "better" award description will breathe life, continually, into a flower whose beauty and physical being have long since vanished. What finer way to justify the time and effort we all devote to the assessment of such momentary loveliness!