

Some Notes on Awards Photography

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Whenever slides of awarded plants are being reviewed at the American Orchid Society Regional Judging Centers, even the least critical eye is affronted by the uneven quality of the photography. I have often heard it said, during these monthly sessions, "Well, you can't judge orchids from a slide." I can think of no more biting indictment of the photographic abilities of some of our most dedicated Awards Photographers. True, one cannot judge an orchid from a slide that over- or under-exposed, out of focus, badly composed or otherwise inadequate. Yet any awards photograph worthy of the name should at least make it clear why the flower or plant was considered superior. In fact, that is the challenge to the Awards Photographer every time the shutter is clicked.

The chief purpose of photographing awarded orchids is to provide future American Orchid Society judging teams with a pictorial record to supplement the written description that accompanies every award. While there is no rule against making an awards photograph aesthetically pleasing, the primary function of these photographs is to record visually as many of the outstanding features of the awarded clone as possible. Therefore, before the actual filming, the photographer should know the type of award involved (merit or cultural), as well as the main considerations that led to the granting of the award. Only when thus informed can the photographer do an intelligent job and produce a film record that will be of maximum value to future judging teams.

In general, Merit Awards (FCC, AM, HCC) require photographs of the best individual flower. In the case of multiflowered inflorescences, or floriferous miniatures, one or more individual sprays may be more representative of the awarded clone.

The newly adopted Certificate of Botanical Recognition and Certificate of Horticultural Merit (which replace the CBM) require a close-up of an individual flower which can serve as an aid in identifying clones of the same species submitted at future judging sessions. Properly executed, such a picture will also be of value to hobbyists seeking identification of their own whatsis.

On the other hand, Cultural Awards require a picture of the entire plant, showing as many of the flowers as possible, as well as the general condition of the plant. Since the method of growing the plant is of interest, the picture should also disclose the container (basket, pot, slab, whatever).

EQUIPMENT

Camera and Lens

Since the American Orchid Society needs at present a set of 20 35mm color slides for each awarded clone, along with an 8x10 black-and-white print (for reproduction in the *Awards Quarterly*), the Awards Photographer's basic tool is a 35mm camera body fitted

with a lens suitable for macro (close-up) photography. The single-lens-reflex (SLR) camera is almost universally preferred for this type of work. Its through-the-lens viewing system eliminates parallax problems (subject off-center) while permitting critical, selective focusing.

Since modern cameras can be expected to last almost indefinitely, it pays to acquire the very best equipment you can afford, both mechanically and optically. The investment can be prorated over a long period of years during which you can approach every shooting session with confidence. I have found the Nikon system durable and dependable. Other photographers I know are equally happy with their Canons, Minoltas, etc. In fact, any camera-lens combination that produces needle-sharp pictures from corner to corner, up to a one-to-one subject/image ratio, is ideal. My personal lens preference is the Micro-Nikkor Auto 55 mm f3.5 with its accessory "M" ring. I have never encountered a flower it could not handle with aplomb.

Some photographers prefer a longer focal-length lens (105mm) mounted in reverse for close-up work. Fine, provided the lens was in fact designed for this purpose. Still others use a normal (50mm) lens mounted on extension tubes or a bellows. Again, fine – if the lens produces sharp pictures without distortion of any kind.

By definition, awards photography is a one-chance proposition. If you blow it, there is no opportunity for re-shooting. So you want to use only equipment with which you are completely familiar. The same applies to lights, film and accessories.

Lights

Available-light photography has its uses but not in making awards pictures. The two most reliable, portable lighting systems are incandescent (floods) and strobes. Each has its pluses and minuses.

Incandescents give the photographer complete control over light intensity, balance, shadow-fill, key-lighting, exposure and so on. Standard exposure meters can ensure accuracy. Three floods, or two floods and a spotlight, will cover virtually any situation. Just two floods and a homemade reflector (crumpled tinfoil taped to a flat cardboard) are almost as versatile.

Drawbacks: a hefty source of 120-volt AC current will be needed. This usually involves extension cords, cube-taps, etc. The best color film (Kodachrome 25 – see below) is impractical with incandescent light sources. The necessary filtration shows it to glacial speed. But heat is the worst problem. All too often, growers return home with their awarded plants severely scorched from the photography session. Rule-of-hand: after setting up your lights and the subject plant, hold your hand close to the plant for a few seconds. If it gets uncomfortably war, the flowers – and perhaps the plant itself – will suffer during the multiple exposures you must make. Back off the offending light(s) and check again.

Of course, you must be absolutely certain that your color film is balanced for the color temperature (expressed in degrees Kelvin) of your lighting system. A differential of only 200 degrees Kelvin, which your eye cannot detect, will produce a depressing shift in color values on film.

Strobes have their advantages as well, although they demand a bit more technical finesse on the part of the photographer. They are compact and very lightweight. They produce no heat and they are self-powered, eliminating the need for a handy AC outlet, extension cords, etc. One master strobe, attached to the camera by a short extension cord, can synchronize with two or more slave units through photocells. Most modern strobe units offer a choice of automatic or manual operation. Always use manual as differences of flower brightness can totally mislead the automatic sensor.

Before you undertake any awards photography with a new strobe unit, test it with a roll of the same color emulsion you plan to use regularly. (Strobes are nominally color-balanced for daylight films, such as Kodachrome 25.) Manufacturers invariably overstate the guide numbers (footcandles) for their various strobe units and your only defense is to make some test exposures at normal working distances, bracketing the manufacturer's recommended aperture by $\frac{1}{2}$ and one full f-stop either way. Keep a record of the frame numbers and exposure settings, then assess the results after processing. You will probably find your basic strobe emits about 25% less light than claimed.

As with incandescents, you will ideally use three strobe units – one triggered by the shutter mechanism in the camera, the other two slaved. Avoid shooting orchids (or anything else) with a flash-on-camera. This can only result in a flat, dead, totally uncommunicative rendition, a three-dimensional flower reduced to a cardboard cutout. Granted, front-lighting is essential in color photography, but it needn't emanate from two inches above the lens. Use a short flash extension cord so you can hold (or attach) the master strobe unit a few inches above or below the camera, and a few inches to either side. Position the slave units to provide key- and backlighting, or fill light, as the individual subject may require. Just two strobes and a reflector will serve in a pinch.

If strobe-to-subject distances are carefully measured, light intensities and balance can be accurately controlled. A strobe-meter can be extremely useful provided it, too, has been accurately calibrated prior to use on location.

Because strobe lighting is so intense, it is ideal with the relatively slow color films, where we want the smallest possible lens aperture for the greatest depth of field. But strobes can be rather overpowering for black-and-white close-ups. There is a simple solution for doing the black-and-white chore without re-gearing the entire lighting setup. Cover the strobes with one or two thicknesses of white handkerchief, white Kleenex, or any other pure white, translucent material, which will cut down the intensity to a manageable level. Again, prior experimentation is essential.

Whatever lighting system you prefer, make certain that you are familiar with its vagaries before undertaking a one-chance shooting assignment. And please try not to fry people's prize plants!

N. B.: Never attempt to make color slides under fluorescent lighting. Even to the accommodating human eye, fluorescents do dreadful violence to flower colors. Color films are far less accommodating, and the results will be frightful to behold.

Film

For ideal color saturation, fidelity and uniformity, I have found no equal to Kodachrome 25. If you are limited to incandescent light sources, then you no alternative but one of the Ektachrome emulsions balanced to your lighting (or one of the foreign-made color films, if you're adventurous). As a rule, the greater the film speed, the coarser the grain, and the poorer the color rendition. Choose the slowest color film compatible with your lighting resources. Whichever film you choose, use it consistently. The fewer variables in your shooting setup, the fewer mistakes you're likely to make. For the requisite black-and-whites, Kodak Plus-X is a good choice. It has moderate speed (125), very fine grain when properly processed, and excellent tonal gradation.

Accessories

A sturdy, adjustable tripod is an absolute must. The kind with a vertical column which can be raised or lowered a couple of feet is the most convenient. Beware a hobby shop tripods with spindly, three- or four-section telescoping legs. In use, they will quake like aspen leaves, defeating their whole purpose. A cable release is another essential. Even while shooting with strobes, use one – it will prevent your shifting the camera inadvertently during the series of shots.

As for lens attachments, I have never seen a so-called auxiliary close-up lens that was adequate from an optical standpoint. They simply will not give good definition at the corners of the picture. For reliable results, invest in a basic lens specifically designed for macro photography.

A filter holder that will accept small (3 inches x 3 inches) gelatin color correction printing filters makes it possible to overcome some of the deficiencies that persist to this day in all color films, including my beloved Kodachrome 25. When filming flowers in the purple-lavender-blue range of the spectrum, you will find the resulting transparencies nearly always look much redder than the original subject. This can be corrected to a degree by using a 20CC (color correcting) Cyan filter in front of the camera lens. All other color values in the picture will also be shifted somewhat to the cold, or bluish side, so you will have to make a value judgment before deciding to filter. In the case of very delicate pastels in the aforementioned color ranges, a 10CC Cyan filter might prove adequate.

The veteran Awards Photographer always carries in his kit a small, camel's hair brush (the kind watercolorists use) for flicking specks of dirt off flower segments, and a box of Kleenex tissues for swabbing spray and other residues from foliage.

BACKGROUNDS

The best all-purpose background is a swatch of black velvet large enough to cover the visible area behind the plant or flower. In the case of very dark flowers, a neutral gray, seamless paper is desirable. Be sure to place it far enough behind the plant so that distracting shadows won't show. If the paper has been creased or marred in transit, make sure it is completely out of focus.

Do not photograph orchids "as is" in an exhibit. The background will be cluttered with other plants, entry tags, award ribbons, etc. Remove the awarded clone and carry it to your location "studio."

Brightly-colored backgrounds always call attention to themselves instead of the orchid. Ditto textured backgrounds or those with a busy, emphatic design of any sort. Eliminate anything from the plant that might compete for the viewer's attention – labels, award sheets, ribbons, stakes, etc. A bit of black velvet may also be used to conceal a white plastic pot. Uncovered, the pot will overpower the flower every time.

Whenever using a dark background, place one light source above the flower and slightly behind it. This rims the edge of the flower with light and helps make it stand out from the background. (Be sure this light doesn't reach the camera lens, or flaring will result.)

COMPOSITION

An orchid photographer I know describes many orchid pictures as "nose shots." He objects to the head-on, dead perpendicular camera angle, and so do I. While we are basically shooting for a record in awards photography, there is no law on the books against shifting the camera a few subtle degrees to the right or left of dead center (or above, or below, for that matter). This way the column, that all-important feature of every orchid, can be seen in its true configuration, while petals and sepals retain their proper relationship. These few degrees of camera shift often spell the difference between a dull, static pose and a dynamic picture.

When photographing paphiopedilums, be sure the camera angle is high enough to disclose the entire staminode. All true paph-lovers are staminode freaks. Also watch for heavy shadows inside paph dorsals. Use a fill-light or a reflector if necessary.

Whenever you arrange a flower at the slight angle suggested above, be sure it "looks into" the frame; i.e., if the flower faces slightly to the right, compose with somewhat more blank space to the right side of the picture. This also holds true for sprays of flowers – they should point into the frame, not out of it. And never, never crop off the end of a

spray, even if it's only buds. These amputations are very painful to viewers, if not to the plant.

Each flower deserves careful study to determine its best angle, always bearing in mind the points or features which the judging team found most notable. These are the features which future judging teams will want to be able to see.

Always allow a slight (five to ten percent) margin inside the viewfinder frame for the cropping of the slide mount. This is not necessary for black-and-whites, but it is a good habit to acquire anyway. With this reservation in mind, shoot flowers as close up as possible.

Since many projection screens are designed for a horizontal picture format (three-to-two ratio), avoid shooting vertical frames unless the subject resembles a giraffe – or you are trying for a *Bulletin* front cover!

TITLING

As the Awards Photographer, you will probably be responsible for copying the pertinent award information on each finished slide-mount. An instruction sheet is included with every AOS judging kit. It should be followed meticulously. Black-and-white prints should be similarly identified. If you wish to control or limit reproduction rights, this should be indicated on the back of the slide-mount, along with your picture credit.

Black-and-white prints reproduce best from glossy (but not necessarily ferro-typed) paper stock, single or double-weight.

IN GENERAL

No matter how experienced you may be, take a tip from professional pilots: always use a checklist, especially when you are shooting away from your familiar home or studio. In light of your own procedures and experience (including previous disasters), make up your own list. Mine includes: recheck focus, composition, aperture and shutter speed; meter reading, or strobe distances to subject; distracting material in view; dirt, lint, spider webs, etc. on flower. And after each exposure, I keep a skeptical eye on the rewind knob to be certain the film is traveling properly through the camera when I actuate the film-advance/shutter-cocking lever. There is nothing more discouraging than carefully making 20 exposures on the backplate of the camera.

In summary, standardize camera, lens, film, lights and accessories. The simplest compositions are usually the best. Eliminate all distractions from the picture. Get to know the whims and fancies of your exposure metering system, whether it is hand-held or built-in. Take readings close enough to your subject so the background doesn't affect the meter. Do all your experimenting and calibrations before location shooting.

If possible, work in a secluded spot so you will not be distracted by amateurs, envious growers and kibitzers.

No one has ever made a perfect picture, but the fun is in the trying.