

Judging Orchid Show Exhibits

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For many orchid lovers, their first encounter with this loveliest of flowers is a visit to a local orchid show. Their first exposure to the American Orchid Society judging system, with its “mystery” and “incomprehensible” standards, probably happens then, too, when they observe the plaques, ribbons, and the golden A.O.S. Show Trophy adorning the charming exhibits. How ironic it is, then, that this new relationship should begin in the area that is the least-defined and almost never fully discussed — judging of show exhibits.

On the subject of show exhibits, the A.O.S. *Handbook on Judging and Exhibition* has almost none of the well-defined and clearly articulated standards that have been developed for the flowers and other awards. I believe the reason for this apparent lack of standards is the difficulty in defining what it is that the judges are looking for within boundaries that are clearly definitive yet sufficiently broad to allow a full range of artistic expression. This is not an easy task. Yet it is one we must undertake because the orchid world looks to the judging system for guidelines for progressive excellence. We should not disappoint them. At the risk of fomenting strong opinions (not all of them supportive), I will try to formulate some of these missing guidelines, most of which already are used, at least subconsciously, by many judges. All of us easily can recognize superior effort. But many of us have trouble articulating the elements that form the basis for our judgment.

First, an important definition from the *Handbook*:

Accessories — Articles other than the orchid plants or flowers exhibited. They must be subordinate to the orchids but a part of the whole. Cut foliage and foliage plants, stands and containers, backgrounds, etc. are classed as accessories.

To this, I would add two definitions of my own:

Arrangement — The grouping of plants and accessories that is aesthetically pleasing and that supports the theme.

Theme — A mental or artistic framework on which an exhibit is based.

Every exhibit has a theme, and the excellence of any exhibit largely measures the success with which the exhibit carries out the theme. (I am not talking here of the show theme, which is an entirely different matter, and which may or may not be identical with the theme of an exhibit.)

To qualify for the A.O.S. Show Trophy, an exhibit must be at least 25 square feet in area. The exhibit is evaluated and points are scored on the following criteria:

GENERAL ARRANGEMENT — 35 Points

Plants or flowers should be arranged in such a way as to accentuate the theme of the exhibit while displaying each specimen to its best advantage. This can be very difficult when a single plant or group of plants is so large or unique in appearance that it potentially overwhelms the exhibit. Such plants may prove to be unusable if they disrupt the aesthetic balance of the exhibit. Should the exhibitor choose to use such a plant (or group of plants), the entire exhibit probably should be centered around it because it will be the “center of attraction” anyway. Not surprisingly, miniatures and large plants are nearly impossible to mix in an exhibit unless well-separated by elevation or depth. Obviously, miniatures should be placed close to eye level for visual impact. Displays can be wondrously inventive in arrangement to permit this.

Obviously, non-orchidaceous plants must remain subdued and unobtrusive. For example, a fern frond, no matter how lovely, is a discordant note in a mass of orchid flowers. Casual visitors will not be alarmed a bit by such mixtures and probably will fail to understand how it could be distracting. But it will be to many judges’ eyes. (A plant leaf less distinctive may be acceptable.)

The first thing to catch a viewer’s eye in any exhibit is likely to be color. Of course, the eye moves on quickly to form and balance, but color is first. Orchids generally look best in exhibits if arranged in groups of a single color or at least with compatible colors placed together. If violent changes of color must be made because of the plant material available, it’s best to separate groups of dissimilar colors by appropriate accessories and/or a change in depth or elevation within the exhibit. Opposite ends of the color spectrum placed together are likely to appear disharmonious. It is most pleasing for “mass tones” (the basic color, such as red) to be placed or grouped with careful regard for color undertones. Yellow-shade reds, such as crimson or Chinese red, will clash with blue-shade reds or red-violets if they are placed together, and the result will not add to the exhibit’s attractiveness. The same plants arranged with careful attention to mass tones and undertones will blend perfectly and should be rewarded with a higher point score.

The old rule of placing dark colors near the bottom of an exhibit and lighter colors near the top is still valid. This rule actually mirrors nature (what one “expects” to see), so it should be disregarded only with caution.

Elevation within a exhibit is one of the primary ways in which the exhibitor can lead the viewer’s eyes around the interior of the exhibit. A display that has so overwhelming a center of attraction as to force the eye toward it from all corners of the exhibit has a fundamental flaw. The eye should be pleased in every quadrant by what it sees and should move effortlessly from one sector to another, finding flowers and accessories in perfect balance everywhere. The rule of “tall in the back, short in the front” is so basic that it hardly bears mentioning. But when it is violated with skill, the effect can be stunning. Displays that lack meaningful three-dimensional reality run the risk of being boring and unexciting. A prerequisite for a successful display is that attention has been paid to how the exhibit looks from all possible viewing angles. Any display that has an

overwhelming mass of flowers or accessories or that shows that dreaded curse of the amateur exhibitor, the unfillable “hole,” reveals a serious flaw in arrangement.

Orchids are graceful flowers, and they should be displayed in such a way as to accentuate their grace. Sprays of phalaenopsis or odontoglossums and their relatives are breathtaking when allowed to cascade from eye height. To place them in a mass of other orchids or to put them on the floor level is wasting their finest attribute.

Similarly, paphiopedilums are such unique orchids for texture, shape, and flower balance that they are difficult to use intermixed with other orchids. They tend to get overwhelmed or detract from the other inflorescences. Often, they are best displayed in groupings by themselves.

No discussion of “arrangement” would be complete without mentioning the role played by accessories because it is their ability to communicate the exhibit’s theme that ultimately will tie the whole exhibit together in all but naturalistic displays. Plant accessories are easy to discuss because colored foliage or non-orchidaceous flowers are clearly inappropriate. Plants used for adding height or background greenery are easy to arrange pleasingly because we are used to seeing them that way in the world around us. A refreshing mixture of textures and elevations in these living accessories should be noted in the score.

Man-made accessories, however, pose an entirely different problem because they are inherently of interest and will always draw the eye in an exhibit. But they must not overwhelm the exhibit in size or be disharmonious within its design. Each accessory, while clearly subordinate to the flowering material, must contribute something to the theme or it doesn’t belong there. It is, for example, almost impossible to do a “living room scene” in orchids because the individual fixtures will draw primary attention. We are too trained to look at furniture styles, color groupings, etc. to allow this theme to work with orchids. The orchids always will be subordinate to the accessories, and this is not acceptable.

All accessories should be pleasing to the eye. Poorly built props or accessories in bad condition are usually worse than none at all. Antiques are allowed under “artistic license” because the viewer subconsciously will take into account their condition. But the use of objects with peeling paint, dented metal, warped wood, etc. should be penalized in the point scoring.

Each accessory should add to the whole. Many fine exhibits have been compromised because someone insisted in using a favorite (but inappropriate) prop. Accessories should be: authentic (e.g., avoid fresh-water cattails in an oceanside theme), appropriate (naturalistic scenes should not have man-made items), and workable (the effect should be Believable — aluminum foil as substitute for real sheet aluminum won’t work!). If a viewer’s eye keeps going back to an accessory, it has lost its subordination, and the exhibit should be penalized. Where accessories have been selected and used properly, the eye should pass over them with delight and focus instead on key orchids.

A few final no-nos: Cut-off trees or shrubs that wilt during the show are in poor taste and offensive, as is an assigned space only partially filled or an exhibit that clearly does not have sufficient plant material to create a worthwhile display in the space it does use. An exhibit should have a single theme that is immediately obvious and is worked out in such a way as to tie the exhibit's flowering material together smoothly. Exhibits that have multiple or conflicting themes or exhibits where a theme cannot be identified at all are usually confusing and directionless.

QUALITY OF FLOWERS — 35 Points

While we, of course, hope to find the best-quality flowers possible in orchid exhibits, it is well to bear in mind that many persons participating will have neither the time, space, money, nor other resources of the commercial grower. Most flowers in show exhibits are grown by amateurs, and, while the quality of flowers increases each year, there are still plenty of plants used in show exhibits that we quickly would screen out at the judging table. No matter. When properly arranged in a display, they will be lovely, and our eyes will spend little time criticizing their individual lack of excellence. What, then, should we be looking for in flower quality? Here are some suggestions:

- Flowers should be in near-perfect condition. Spikes that are broken or that must be staked visibly to display their flowers properly, flowers with missing petals, pouchless paphs, etc. belong in the station wagon that brought them, not in the display. If they can be used unobtrusively or if the defects can be hidden, so be it. But woe unto the display that tolerates obviously damaged flowers that catch the judge's eye!
- No insect infestation, virus, color break, or other visible disease or deformities should be tolerated.
- The flowers displayed should be the right size, color, and form for their type. For example, odontoglossums grown too warm produce dull, muddy colors. Phalaenopsis grown under multiple layers of insulation result in weak spikes, pale colors, and total lack of substance. Poorly grown paphiopedilums may produce flowers on short, crooked stems. Leave these and other disappointments at home. When they are included in the exhibit, the display should be scored accordingly.
- Species that are not horticulturally interesting or huge plants with naturally insignificant flowers generally cannot be used without penalty in show exhibits. Occasionally, you see such a plant used as an accessory, with emphasis on the variation in foliage form. Good idea. Reward it accordingly.
- Orchid genera are available today through the mericlone process in almost unbelievable quality and quantity at modest cost. Flowers that were all the rage 20 years ago seem ho-hum today, and serious exhibitors should have upgraded their collections to exclude them. Large, floppy cattleyas with open sepals and petals or early attempts at breeding decently colored phalaenopsis are no longer of interest to most orchid growers. Their presence in an exhibit should be cause for penalty under flower quality, especially if other exhibits don't have this fault.

Some types of orchids (usually hybrids) show a tendency toward incomplete resupination or other obvious defects in their arrangement of flowers on the inflorescence. Such flowers should be screened from the exhibit so that their imperfection does not mar the excellence of the other plants in the exhibit. If these imperfect flowers are obvious in the display, this can be reflected in the “Quality” point score.

VARIETY — 20 points

Behind this point-count requirement lies the realization that exhibits benefit from variations in color, form, texture, size, and arrangement of inflorescences. In fact, one of the Orchidaceae’s most fascinations is the seemingly endless variation of forms within it. Ironically, exhibits that boast no repetition of flower forms or colors tend to be “busy.” Our mind and our eyes love the familiar. Gentle repetition of particularly pleasing flower forms and colors is desirable.

It does not follow, in my judgment, that a display must have a maximum variation, regardless of other features. One of the most stunning displays I have ever seen was done with only a single species of *Paphiopedilum* (*Paph. callosum*, I believe), repeated over and over again in perfectly spaced groupings scattered through a “forest” of living mosses and live tree ferns. The purple, white, and green-striped dorsal sepals were delicately elevated above a background of finely textured greenery, with the mottled leaves in perfect harmony. In a case such as this, however, the accessories must be truly as unusual as the orchids and yet remain subdued. This is very hard to accomplish but is brilliant when well-executed.

To score highly in this area, a display need not have a large number of genera represented, either. A most enticing exhibit could be created using only the species or hybrids found in a single genus, for example *Cattleya*, *Phalaenopsis*, or *Masdevallia* (for the miniature enthusiast), and still could be refreshingly variable. Clearly, what is to be avoided is a mass of similar flowers unnoteworthy for any quality save their sameness. We have all felt the same dismay at viewing a display made up of dozens of the same flowers, dreary in their uniformity, yet individually outstanding as single flowers. Careful use of the 20 points assigned to this category is advised, with rewards for refreshing variation and penalties for horticultural boredom.

LABELING — 10 points

Mercifully, we seem to have progressed beyond the “tombstone” period of black writing on white cards, which cannot be made unobtrusive in any exhibit, no matter what the theme or arrangement. Any non-conflicting system of labeling that is large and clear enough to be read from the viewing area without craning the neck (or using binoculars) is satisfactory. White ink on black cards, currently in the vogue in the Northeast, blends with almost any scheme or décor. Calligraphy, if used, must not be so ornate that it obscures names that are difficult for the general populace to comprehend and read under any conditions. Plain block letters, although dull to some people, at least are perfectly clear.

Unhappily, we still see the system of labeling plants with a number and elsewhere in the exhibit placing a key or index to these numbers. In small displays, this can work, but it is a great inconvenience when viewing any sizable exhibit. The natural congregating area will be — you guessed it! — right in front of the key, and by the time the viewer is able to make his way to it, there is a 50% chance that he has forgotten the number he wants to identify. Trying to find a single number amid a sea of them take infinite patience. It is far better to find a neat label near the flower. In order to be certain that every flower of note is clearly identified, the exhibitor must be sensitive to how the label will look from the viewing area. Labels placed in a pot some two feet from the flowers will not do the job. More care to position the label closer to the actual flower should be rewarded in the scoring. Individual plant labels placed by the owner should be removed or made invisible in the exhibit because multiple systems of identification can be confusing or look untidy.

FURTHER COMMENTS

We need more training for judges and students in judging the fine points of orchid exhibits. Too often, judges take their score sheets and, based on their own experience, decide which display, if any, should be awarded the Show Trophy. As a former show clerk, I can attest to the fact that many judges do not score the sheet but merely come to a number in their minds then record it. Students and relatively inexperienced judges rarely have the opportunity to discuss the relative merits of an exhibit. The time to do this is when the judges are standing in front of the various displays. Later, we have only an incomplete recollection of our thoughts about the display.

I also think it is time that the A.O.S. begin requiring a photographic record of exhibits that are awarded the Show Trophy. In this way, we can preserve a record of the excellence we saw fit to reward.

Finally, we need a mechanism to inform the exhibitors of the relative success of their efforts. Orchid shows cost a lot in terms of personal commitment, money, effort, and enthusiasm. To install a display that is well-conceived and well-executed and then to hear nothing whatsoever as to why it did not “win the bronze” does little to reward all this effort. With today’s increasingly “computerized” judging, it ought to be possible to create a mechanism whereby exhibitors learn more concretely about the decisions regarding their exhibits. It is appropriate that such information be tabulated and made available for the education of the exhibitors. The extra effort this would entail would be promptly rewarded, I believe, with even more lovely exhibits than the ones now being presented.