

The Role of Research in Judging Orchids

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The American Orchid Society's *Handbook on Judging and Exhibition* states on page 1 that award or merit judging is the method used when orchids "are evaluated for their intrinsic merit against hypothetical standards of perfection in the minds [sic] of each judge." Further, on page 35, we find: "New lines of breeding, including new shapes, colors, or growth habit should be considered *but should not be awarded unless the new line has superior characteristics and quality* [my emphasis]."

The question then comes to mind: How do judges determine what constitutes such standards, superior characteristics, and quality? The answer lies in research. Through Volume 14, Number 1 of the *Awards Quarterly*, the American Orchid Society had granted a total of 19,663 awards and now, as Volume 16 begins, we are well over 20,000. No judge can possibly be expected to know all the details. Any judges who claim to know all the standards without research are fooling themselves and the exhibitor.

Every time an award is made, a new standard is established. We go to great lengths to document each new award properly so that this new standard is readily accessible at future judgments. To ignore these priceless records is a dereliction of duty.

Reference to records of previous awards is, however, only part of the overall responsibility of a judge in ascertaining intrinsic value. Recognition of intrinsic worth may be derived from a study of the literature, personal experience, consultation with other judges with respected expertise in a particular field, and from other sources.

Let us explore some of the methods that can be used to arrive at these conclusions:

SPECIES: When a judge is confronted with an unfamiliar species, he should utilize as many resources as necessary to evaluate the plant's intrinsic merit. He should ask himself these questions:

1. **What is the country of origin?** This provides a clue in selecting the proper definitive flora for research. If it is a New World genus, then looking through Asiatic or African floras is a waste of time. A quick and effective way to determine the country of origin is to consult a general work, such as B.S. Williams' *The Orchid-Grower's Manual*, Alex D. Hawkes' *Encyclopaedia of Cultivated Orchids*, or *The Manual of Cultivated Orchid Species* by Helmut Bechtel, Phillip Cribb and Edmund Launert. Once the country of origin is determined, then you can proceed to a specialized flora for a more definitive diagnosis.
2. **Has the species received an award in the past?** The index to the *Register of Awards* and the *Awards Quarterly* can be used quickly and easily. If the plant under consideration has received awards in the past, select a good cross section of the higher awards and formulate your idea of the plant's intrinsic value.

3. **Is there a photograph?** Each A.O.S. judging center has a set of slides of the A.O.S. awards and each center should have a way to display them. While we should *not* judge against slides, there is merit in checking for color and, along with written descriptions in the Awards Quarterly, formulating a good mental picture of the ideal. There are also good indices of orchid illustrations in color that can be extremely helpful.
4. **Has there been a recent award to this species that has not yet been published?** Each judging center receives a copy of every awards summary sheet as soon as the Awards Registrar processes them. These should be filed in the judging center for quick reference. Consulting these summary sheets should always be a prerequisite, particularly for species being considered for Certificate of Botanical Rarity (CBR) or Certificate of Horticultural Merit (CHM) awards.
5. **Have you exhausted all avenues available to make an intelligent decision?** If so, formulate in your mind the composite picture of the intrinsic value of the species based on your research. Next, look at the species to be evaluated. Color, form, presentation, size, and other characteristics must all be considered. Then the two plants — the hypothetical “ideal” and the one under consideration — should be compared.
6. **How does this comparison appear in relation to previous awards?** Is it better, worse, or about the same? Will the standards be improved by this award? Will they be compromised? Or would this be just another award on the books? Why should you really want to give the plant or flower an award?

When you are convinced that the awards system of the American Orchid Society is best served by granting an award to this plant, continue with established procedures.

Otherwise, do not. All pretty plants are not award-quality!

HYBRIDS: The procedures for judging hybrids are much the same as for species with some further requirements. Ask yourself these additional questions:

1. **Has the plant been registered properly?** *Sander's List of Orchid Hybrids* and the computer printouts at each judging center can be referred to quickly for this information.
2. **What species are in the background of the plant being considered?** The Handbook on Judging and Exhibition lists criteria for judging hybrids in the different genera and in every case, we find such phrases as, “The chief criterion is improvement over the ancestral species.” Once these ancestral species can be ascertained, a good hypothetical standard can be formed in the mind of the judge.

When these questions have been answered to the satisfaction of the judge, the procedures outlined above for species should be applied.

CONCLUSION: Judges are responsible for maintaining the highest standards for evaluating orchids for the American Orchid Society. Vast amounts of time are expended in accumulating and publishing data of these standards and it is the responsibility of judges to know how to use these data — and, indeed, *to* use them. To do so is commendable and in no way minimizes any claim to expertise. Rather, it enhances such a claim.

In the preface to the first edition of the *Register of Awards*, compiled in 1956 for all awards given to orchid plants and flowers by the A.O.S. from June 1932 to December 1955, we find this statement in part:

“This *Register of Awards* is designed primarily as a chronological record of the basic awards given to orchids by the A.O.S....As such, it will fill a long-felt need for a ready reference to the awards, and the standards of the awards, given to certain species and hybrids...But beyond the more obvious aim, this chronological record achieves a larger purpose. Woven into its statistical data is the history of the development of orchid growing in this country, a synopsis of modern hybridizing and a chart of the changing currents of orchid interest. For those who wish to reach between the lines, there is depicted the rising standards of orchid judging, the critical taste of the orchid connoisseur, the clear reflection of increased knowledge and improved techniques. There is a practical evaluation of orchid collections, both private and commercial. There is instruction and guidance in the selection of plants for purchase. And there is much more of value for each reader to discover for himself.”

No credit is given for the author of those sage words, which are no less true today than when written almost 30 years ago. Note the phrases “standards of awards” and “there is depicted the rising standards of orchid judging.”

At each judging, are we reminding ourselves that in some way we should be helping to raise the standards of orchid judging? That is our heritage.