

"Our orchid judging glass;
is it half full or is it half empty?"

Reflections on the judging system by two commercial exhibitors

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by Graham Wood & Terry Root

The mostly fondly remembered judging events are the times Graham has had judging at the Trustees Show. Judges attending there do so with a desire and intention to grant awards. They bring with them little or no knowledge of, or prejudice towards, the exhibitors. He clearly remembers one Trustees meeting he attended. There were two different events that happened at that show. One was the variegated plant that came to the table where he was judging. Let's give it a JC. Said Graham, the student, but surely it should have flowers that will photograph reasonably well? Not relevant, give the plant a JC and the vote was unanimous. The other event remembered fondly at that same show is that he was still a student at the time and a judge's region and standing had been listed on the program but abbreviated. He was listed as "Hawaii Stud". And his wife still thinks that refers to his successful orchid breeding program!

Our final article reviewer suggested we lead with the paragraph you have just read. We thought about it and agreed, start with something positive and it will intrigue people to read further.

However almost all his other comments were in the same vane, nothing negative as this will turn the reader off. We thought long and hard about this comment and have chosen to disagree as the recommended changes would have completely gutted the article of its intended effect which is to get judges talking and considering what changes can be made to make the judging experience more enjoyable for both themselves and more importantly for the exhibitors.

Please read and consider our thoughts. They are not aimed at any particular center or judge; rather they are presented in an effort to make the judging experience more enjoyable for both the exhibitors and for the judges themselves. These thoughts are the results of the combined experiences of two exhibitors, both of whom have judging experience in several regions and many centers. Please consider each point we make. Does it apply in your center? What changes can we make in individual centers to improve both the judging experience and the exhibitor experience? A typical reaction from judges

who have read earlier drafts of this article has been "I recognize the symptoms, but they don't happen in my center". That is of possible, of course, but let us ask, if they aren't happening how is it that you recognize them? Whether or not these symptoms apply in your region there is another way judges could look at our comments. "Is our center losing exhibitors?" If so, what can be done to attract new exhibitors, retain existing exhibitors and even persuade former exhibitors to return?

The genesis for this article came from the member survey conducted by the AOS in early 2007 and commented upon by Carlos Fighetti in the August 2007 Orchids magazine. Carlos reported "60 percent of the respondents said that they had entered plants for judging and half of them described this as being an enjoyable experience". That means fully half of them did not enjoy themselves. That is an incredibly high negative number.

This bothered Graham enormously. He is a recently accredited judge who had entered the judging program with the primary objective of becoming a better exhibitor. As he reflected on this survey finding he thought of his own exhibitor experiences. At the same time he began to talk to Terry about the issue. Terry had tried bravely to be a judge but concluded it was not for him. He now is simply a very disenchanted exhibitor. We began to focus on what frustrates us as exhibitors and what, if anything, can be done to improve the experience.

Most of the comments we make are going to be perceived by many readers as being negative. There are many good points in the judging system but a lot of things more than offset those good points from the perspectives of these two particular exhibitors. In summary, and this is harsh we know, but we believe it needs to be said; if we, as commercial orchid businesses, were to treat our customers the way the judging program treats its exhibitors both of us would have been out of business many years ago. And believe us when we say, neither of our businesses is particularly known for its customer friendly approach!

Why do we come to such a drastic conclusion, and more importantly, why would we bother to make our conclusions known? Why not simply be good soldiers and shut up and go along with the status quo?

Answering the second part first, why are we making our thoughts known? We believe the judging program performs a useful and worthwhile function. We know our breeding programs have benefited greatly from having plants reviewed. We know hobbyists delight in the program not just for quality awards but revel in the ribbon programs. We both deal directly with serious hobbyists and with hobbyist buying groups. The excitement an award or even a ribbon generates is a reward in itself for us as the breeders and growers. And we both know from reflecting over our years of involvement with the judging system there

have been some great times both as a judge and as an exhibitor. If we can make those happen on a more consistent basis then the judging program would prosper.

What are the problems we see? They are many, but none that is insurmountable.

It starts with attitude. How many judges make the trek, and for a lot it is a very long trek, to the judging center with the attitude of "isn't this great, tonight I get a chance to award orchids". We only know one who approaches the monthly judging with this attitude. And he is a student! Many judges show up and just look at the number of entries and make comments out loud like "we will be here all night" and "let's hurry up, I need to have dinner". Why, if you don't have the time to devote to this voluntary activity, do you bother to be in the judging system?

Next is the entry process. At a local judging it is no secret of who brought the plant in despite the carefully folded over bottom of the entry form. It is readily apparent that if the exhibitor is on the "A List" an entry will fare considerably better than if he or she is on the "B List"

Then comes the nomination process and this is a big area of controversy. If all the entries are displayed in one grouping a small plant is simply overshadowed by the larger entries. If the process involves a walk past the exhibits, then many judges at the end of the line tend to feel that if the plant has not already been checked, why should I bother? This can be rectified by sending all entries other than the obvious rejects to the judging tables. But that provokes the "I don't have time" type of a response from many judges who simply do not want to look at each and every plant.

Once an entry has made it to a judging table then the real suspense begins. Has it gone to the "award" team or to the "kill" team?

Now is the opportunity for the judges to begin "trash talking". This happens in a way that would make an NFL lineman proud. Everyone is competing to see how many negatives can be brought up. Judges should say "let's see if we can determine what the exhibitor saw in this flower that motivated the entry". Judges should be careful phrasing their comments. It makes the world of difference in a team's attitude if the comment is "the stem holds the flower nicely above the leaves but it's a shame it is not more upright" rather than "crooked stem, flower is presented poorly". It literally can be the difference between being screened and simply being an issue of points off.

Then there are the kiss of death comments such as "it's a lovely pot plant" or "(the exhibitor) just bought this from so and so". Why the latter comment should make any difference we cannot understand, unless the plant is being considered for a cultural award.

We won't articulate any more, you all know them, but just in case someone doesn't we don't want to be guilty of spreading more trash talking comments.

Let's take a positive approach and eliminate the trash talking, negative approach to every entry. Remember, almost every flower is a thing of beauty, even if it does not meet judging standards. There is no need to talk it down, especially when the exhibitor is close at hand.

The same goes for shows. Graham remembers with embarrassment one show where a visiting judge said out loud and within the hearing of several of the show organizers "why did we bother to come, this is a nothing show".

Let's look at what is good about an entry first and then see what is bad. If the good seems to outweigh the bad then this is an entry that probably should be scored as it is clearly above the mid-point. However many judges seem to be afraid of scoring below 75 points and therefore are reluctant to nominate an entry for an award. As exhibitors both of us respect a score far more than some of the vague screening comments that are made. However, many judges seem to feel that if a flower is nominated it should be awarded. Many times, when every other team member has passed on nominating for scoring but Graham has thought he can see at least 70 points he has nominated the entry to be scored. Every time Graham has done this, even after announcing that he is nominating but is not sure that the entry will score high enough, the result has been an award; even when Graham scored low. He gave up this approach as it seemed illogical and contradictory to score the entry high enough for an award after all other team members had passed on the opportunity to nominate in the first place. Nomination should not guarantee an award; it should instead encourage careful scoring.

Another adventure can happen at this point. What happens if the plant's parentage is in doubt? Surely the answer is straight forward for a species; it is a provisional award subject to taxonomic verification. With hybrids we are all over the place. We have seen entries rejected as mislabeled; accepted as entered and screened; and we have seen an entry literally changed to what a judge thought the entry should be and awarded (that exhibitor was on the A List). Consistency is all these two exhibitors ask for, and what all judges should strive for.

If trash talking does not eliminate the entry, what's next? It's the infamous rush to the ruler. "It's not as big as the previous award; the dorsal is 2mm narrower" or such comment. Is that a fatal flaw? It certainly is treated as if it is. One entry was screened because one petal was half a millimeter shorter than the other. We both wish we had an eye that keen, or could hold a ruler that steady. And when is size a fatal flaw? If the size is average then score as such and give it 5 points. If size is below average then perhaps that is a fatal flaw. But what is the average size? Is it the average of the awarded plants or average for that type of breeding?

Survive the ruler and what is next? It's the dreaded geometric mean. But does that mean the geometric mean of the typical parents or of the two FCC parents that happen to be listed in the database? And should any consideration be given to the fact that the smaller parent may dominate? This happens in a number of genera. Judges should try to understand the breeding characteristics of both parents.

These last two points are particularly troubling. Size represents only a small fraction of the overall score yet, in our experience, there is an over emphasis on measurement. Is this because size is the only objective criterion on the score sheet? Scoring is clearly weighted in favor of the subjective elements of judging, namely color and form. These are the nuances that should command the judges' primary attention. Until judges realize the emphasis is on these subjective values they are clearly going to be at odds with exhibitors. After all, if size is what matters then we can leave judging to 5th graders who are capable of handling a ruler. Or better yet, the exhibitor can simply take the measurements and mail in the result to claim the award. Remember, beauty is in the eye of the beholder: that color and form have always been, and should remain, the mainstay of judging.

Actual scoring is another adventure; when the range is greater than 6 points as often happens, how do you handle that? Do you return all score sheets and ask everyone to reconsider? Do you hand back the high and the low and ask those two to reconsider? Or as we have seen happen, do you tell the high to come down by so many points to get in the 6 point range?

Then there is the infamous 77 point score. Has any study been made of the number of 77 point HCC's? It seems there are innumerable such awards. Is that because you can't be wrong at 77? Just think, you are in range if someone scores low, it is really rare to see a score below 71; and you are in range all the way up to 83. It is the perfect score to avoid controversy. Terry actually gave up exhibiting following 22 straight 77 point HCC awards. Is there an argument to be made for eliminating the HCC?

Heaven forbid there is a rule question. Rarely is there a rule book present. The usual answer is to take the word of the most eloquent speaker on the team. There is a depressing lack of knowledge of the rules; worse, a lack of knowledge of where to find the answer in the handbook; and a general unwillingness to consult the handbook. The appearance of knowledge seems to be more important than actually getting the rules right.

This leads to our next concern, consistency or rather the lack of it. Yes the handbook covers most circumstances but not all and there is sometimes a need for interpretation. But is the interpretation written down - memorialized, so to speak - so that it can be used in the same way the next time? Never. Also it appears convenient to interpret the rule one

way to suit a circumstance and ignore the rule entirely in the next similar circumstance. And as for remembering what has been awarded recently, no hope; let alone remembering what has been screened.

Another favorite, "I was high/low because I was applying the standards of my previous region". Say what? Isn't this supposed to be a national program?

Paperwork is another bugaboo. Graham has had awards arrive as long as 3 years later; in one case, long after the awarded plant had died. Even now, many awards are over one year old and are still awaiting completion. We know judges are all unpaid volunteers, but why take on the duty if you don't really have the time to devote to the task?

The final peeve, what are you judging? Orchids, and by that we believe it should be all orchids, not just orchids that Fish & Wildlife Services has determined do not belong on CITES Appendix I. Why is a judge expected to be the orchid police and establish the authenticity of an orchid? That is the job of Fish & Wildlife, an agency with paid employees who have intimate knowledge of the law. It should not be the judges' job to question the origin if an exhibitor has the chutzpa to enter a plant of questionable background. If the exhibitor provides papers of authenticity it is appropriate to make that notation in the award description, but how do judges know what paperwork is appropriate? But without any papers then the exhibitor knows the risk being taken in drawing attention to the plant he or she has entered. If judges are expected to police plants, then the very least they should require is appropriate training in what has to be policed. After all, is that just the current fad orchids that are readily available in other countries that have signed CITES or does it extend to all Appendix I orchids? And how many judges who are not commercial growers have anything more than the vaguest idea of what is involved with CITES?

For those of you who have persisted and read this far we would not be surprised if you are thoroughly depressed. Cheer up! We have spent considerable time reflecting on the high spots of judging, and there are some.

Do you remember our opening paragraph? It was here originally and raised the question, how do we bring this willingness and desire to give awards from the Trustees Meetings to the local monthly meetings?

Perhaps it would help if all judges could (preferably must) periodically attend the AOS Trustees show and see the enthusiasm brought to judging at those events.

Perhaps it would not hurt if all judges took a mandatory time out or sabbatical of say 6 months every 3 years just to pause, refresh and reflect on judging values, or simply to "recharge" the judging batteries.

Now that we are formally evaluating students and probationary judges, one way to ensure future knowledge of the handbook could be to have written tests on the handbook. Dare we suggest closed book? Knowledge of the rule book might help eliminate another strange comment. How many times has a novelty hybrid been rejected as "neither one thing nor the other"? Isn't a new direction of breeding included in the AD award?

Thoughts on size, yes it matters, but is overall size a fatal flaw? Only if the flower is substantially smaller than one would normally expect. If the segments in relationship to each other add significantly to the overall composition of the flower and the overall size is in range of expectations, then the flower merits further consideration. We have all seen the paphiopedilum with a "dorsal so large it is to die for" but sporting the wimpiest petals that are totally out of proportion. There clearly size does matter, but is it awardable when the combination is so unbalanced?

Can we overcome the A List/B List concept in local judging? It is clearly the biggest problem and is a crying shame. The note from our final reviewer on this paragraph reads "I think this is only true if the judges and Chair allow this to happen". We do not disagree with the comment but the A/B concept is a reality that causes many to pass on exhibiting. Judges clearly can overcome this bias if they choose to do so. That is our challenge to all centers. Can you put local feelings aside and be objective and enthusiastic about each flower that comes before you. If you can't make that transition and make the experience enjoyable for both you as the judge, and for your exhibitor, then why are you continuing to judge?

A simple change that could be made is a few phone call or e-mails to confirm that the award has been issued, and that it is accurate in every detail. We suggest following up with the exhibitor to ensure the award has been received and that the award is correct in all details; there is nothing worse than getting an award and the exhibitor's name is wrong.

Has any center considered a "business development" judge? This would be someone or several judges who reach out to the orchid growing community and invite potential exhibitors to bring in entries. Perhaps this could be a way to overcome the apprehensions of potential exhibitors and help draw back exhibitors who are no longer participating.

But perhaps the key to making the judging experience more enjoyable for exhibitors is for the judges to remember the exhibitors are the customers. Without exhibitors there is no judging. Let's approach each judging, whether it's a monthly, a local show, or the Trustees' Meeting with the same positive attitude "the glass is half full" and look at every entry from the point of view of the exhibitor first. Understand what the exhibitor sees in the flower and only then look for the defects that may exist. Hold the defects in perspective with the good points of the flower and weigh them against each other. Look for any opportunity to score, even low. Don't look for any opportunity not to score. A score, albeit low, is much

more acceptable to your authors/exhibitors than some of the vague comments that have come back with screened entries.

Look forward to every opportunity you have to judge; it is fun and it performs a valuable service. Remember, this is the time you have an opportunity to grant an award. Think of the glass as half full. Please keep these thoughts in mind at every judging, including ribbon judging. You will enjoy your judging more and your customers, the exhibitors, will appreciate your efforts much more.